

A New Path to Follow - AotC AU

Jade-Max

Star Wars

Complete



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Jade-Max

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Summary

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Description:

Padmé chose another path once her first term as Queen was completed; a "Padmé in the Medical Profession" story. Prequels AU. Padmé POV. What if Padmé had been a medical professional when the Jedi had gone to Geonosis - and she happened to be along?

Introduction

Disclaimer: Star Wars belongs to Disney and is the intellectual property of George Lucas; he created the sandbox. I'm making no money off of this and am simply destroying the sandcastles.

Title: A New Path to Follow

Author: Jade_Max

Timeframe: Prequel Trilogy AU

Genre: AU

Characters: Padmé Naberrie, Obi-Wan Kenobi, Anakin Skywalker

Summary: Padmé chose another path once her first term as Queen was completed; a "Padmé in the Medical Profession" story.

Author's Note: Written several years ago, this has only undergone a very minimal update.

A New Path to Follow

Introduction

"I have been honored to serve as your Queen this past term. The difficulties and challenges have been many and you have all risen magnificently to meet them. I have never been more proud of you, my people, than I have been this past year." Her voice was strong as she spoke to the assembly, her image and speech being broadcast across the world. "I regret to inform you that I will not be able to accept the honor of a second term in office; I must decline."

She paused as she collective gasp, the murmur of the crowd was audible even across her localized amplifier. She forged ahead, and the noise slowly receded as the people strained to hear the rest of her speech.

"Personal reasons and revelations have led me to believe my path is elsewhere. I leave office with a heavy heart but know I am doing what I believe is best for you above all else. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for your belief in me through trying times." She turned, departing from the stage, and stepped back into the cool shadows of the Palace. A weight appeared to have lifted from her shoulders and she reached up to remove the elaborate head dress her current office demanded.

"Padmé."

She didn't pause, simply handed the head dress to the speaker and smiled slightly. "Yes, Sabé."

“Is this wise?”

Padmé finally stopped, her handmaidens having formed a semi-circle around her as she turned to look at them. “You, more than anyone, know why I must do this, Sabé.”

“But the people need your strength.” Eirtae objected. “They need your wisdom.”

“No, they don’t.” Padmé’s smile never wavered as she disputed the fact with a shake of her head, rubbing her scalp with both hands. “The people need someone who isn’t second guessing their decisions, who can be a leader for them without remorse or guilt. They need someone far more world conscious than I.”

“But—”

“No buts.” Padmé pulled each of her handmaidens into a quick embrace. “I will miss you all, but my path lies elsewhere. I *am* sorry I’m leaving you without jobs.”

“That should be the least of your worries.” Sabé told her, unable to be angry with the woman she knew better than anyone else. “You’re really going to study medicine?”

Padmé nodded. “The new Queen will take over next week. I guess I just have to pack my bags. My application’s been accepted; my classes start in less than a month.”

Sabé looked from Padmé to the rest of the handmaidens and back. “We’ll help you pack.”

Padmé smiled gratefully. They hadn’t wanted her to resign, to decline the will of the people of Naboo and she’d been encouraged and counseled to accept the second term in office. They’d been hurt when she’d informed them of her decision. She hadn’t expected them to agree with her, hadn’t asked for, nor expected, their help.

To have it offered, well, it was more than she’d hoped for.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1

Ten years later

Padmé checked the datapad in her hand, quickly scanning through the notes before sliding it into the pocket of her technician's coat and thumbing the door open.

The room was utilitarian, identical to almost every other room in the small hospital except the surgical suite and bacta tank room. The child lying in the bed was looking out the window, a melancholy expression on his face as he watched the children in the nearby nursery playing with the toys.

"Good morning, Sebastian."

His face lit up as his head spun towards her. "Padmé!"

She nodded, smiling as she walked over to check the equipment monitoring his vitals. "Did you sleep well?"

"All I ever do is sleep." His complaint was exasperated. "When do I get to go play with the other kids?" He looked longingly towards the window again.

Padmé pulled a stool up to his bedside, satisfied with the readings on his monitors. "Does tomorrow sound good enough?"

"Really?"

She nodded. "It looks like you've finally be stabilized. Injuries can be tricky things, especially for a growing boy."

He blushed. "I swear I didn't mean to."

"I know." She patted his knee through the blankets. "I just need to check on that leg to make sure it's looking healthy, alright?"

He nodded, kicking the blanket off enthusiastically and presented her with the bright pink, healthy looking limb. Padmé carefully examined the leg, finding the miniscule scar just above his knee where the limb had been severed. She traced the scar and he giggled. "That tickles!"

"At least you can feel it." She pulled a small, rubber mallet from her pocket and tapped in knee cap. His leg jerked and his eyes widened in surprise. "Does that hurt?"

"Oh no, I just didn't think it would move by itself!"

She laughed gently. "Nerves are wonderful things when they work." She continued to examine his leg as she spoke, ensuring that there was no discoloration or swelling anywhere along the limb. "If you touch certain areas just right your legs and arms will move without you actually wanting them too. Pretty neat, huh?"

He nodded, watching her avidly. "Will my leg work like it always did?"

"It should," She glanced back up at him. "But no more accidents, young man. If you lose it again, you'll have to get a robotic replacement."

"You can't just reattach it like you did?" He looked slightly horrified.

Padmé picked his foot up in her hand. "No, Sebastian. Our bodies can do a lot more than they could before, but recovering from serious trauma isn't easy. Can you feel this?"

He nodded, wiggling his toes.

She continued. "If you were to lose this leg again there's a chance you'd die before I even got to you. I want you to promise me you'll be extra careful with it."

"I promise." He swallowed hard. "I don't want to have a bot leg!"

Padmé placed his foot back on the bed and covered it back up. She gently ruffled his hair. "Now that you know you have to be careful, I expect that won't become an issue. Lana should be in shortly with breakfast. If she tells me you've eaten everything I might let you go play this afternoon."

"Really?"

"If you promise to take it easy."

"You always want promises!" His tone was exasperated, but he was grinning from ear to ear. 'I promise Doctor Nabberrie. I'll be a good boy and eat all my breakfast. I'll be super careful in the play room too. I won't let anyone talk me into a fight, or playing a rough game.' He looked at her questioningly. "Is that enough?"

"Scamp." She accused with a laugh. "That's enough. I'll see you this after noon Sebastian. From this point on your leg should be exercised daily to help its recovery."

He squirmed down in his bed, nodding his understanding. Lana entered at that moment with the tray for his breakfast and Padmé took her leave. She couldn't help but grin when Sebastian informed Lana he was going to eat everything on his plate that morning. The boy was incorrigible.

She continued on her rounds, checking the few patients she had assigned to her specialty, and glad she'd begun with the energetic ten year old. One of her patients didn't have the proper blood flow and had slipped into a coma. That patient had been rushed to the surgery. They'd tried to save the limb, but in the end had to amputate it.

Padmé was just glad the amputations were done by droids and weren't a part of her responsibilities. Attempting to save the limb was her department and failures were hard enough to bear without having to remove it later. Dealing with those patients afterwards were always the hardest. She hated to fail and having to explain to the person who'd just lost that particular limb why their surgery hadn't worked wasn't always easy. Some limbs simply didn't reattach well.

Finished her rounds with an hour or so to spare until the afternoon meal, she headed for the break room for a cup of strong café. Her surgery nurse and special assistant, Cordé, was also on her way in.

Cordé smiled sympathetically at the expression on Padmé's face. "Rough morning?"

“You could say that.” She dropped into the chair beside her friend, placing her datapad on the table in front of her. “Two tentative recoveries, two recoveries and two went septic. One so quickly it killed the patient, the other had to be re-amputated!”

“You can’t expect all of them to go according to plan, Padmé.” Cordé told her sympathetically. “You know as well as I do that the body can’t always accept a foreign object.”

“But the object is native to the body, it doesn’t make sense why it would reject its own flesh.”

“So solve it, idiot savant.” Cordé’s tease was light. “You solved the mystery as to how to reconnect everything, here’s your new one.”

“I studied a diagram of the human body and deduced that if you took an almost microscopic look at it you could repair it the same way you repair cloth. Not exactly rocket science.” Padmé rubbed her forehead, lines of strain and stress being slowly smoothed away. “Sometimes I wonder why I left politics for this. It was far less stressful.”

“But?”

Padmé smiled faintly. “But then I look at the children we help, kids like Sebastian who accidentally lose a leg, and I don’t have to ask. Do you think it’s selfish of me for finding peace and reward in their recovery when they have to suffer initially to achieve the final product?”

“Would you call me selfish if I found my job rewarding for simply saving someone’s life?” Cordé pointed her fork at her friend. “You know I wouldn’t. It comes with the territory. Besides, the only reason you chose to go into medicine was because you weren’t able to save that Jedi.”

Padmé’s smile disappeared and she bowed her head. If only she’d known then what she knew now, Qui-Gon Jinn would never have died. At least, that’s what she told herself, but there had been no way of knowing what impact her choices and decisions would have on his life. She had no way of knowing that in accepting his help, she would be signing his death sentence.

The rational part of her brain knew that she couldn’t have changed anything, even if she hadn’t been the Queen. Qui-Gon had died in Obi-Wan’s arms well before any of them had been able to get to him. Even if she’d been the first of the medical personnel on the scene, it would have been too late. Rather than accept it, it had simply hardened her determination.

As Queen, she affected nations.

As a doctor, she could make a difference in a single person’s life, she could save those lives the politicians so carelessly threw aside. She could atone for the deaths her choices had caused.

It was her major reason for choosing a new path.

Now, medical school behind her and a force to be reckoned with in a specialty she’d helped create, she was one of the most sought after surgeons in the galaxy. So, she’d accepted a post on Coruscant in the Republic’s medical ward for free thinking beings.

The Chancellor himself had asked her to come, to offer her talents in the one place she might be able to hone them, and she'd been unable to refuse him. Offered her a ward of her own, a private ward, for working on the injuries in her specialty, he'd also offered her unlimited access to the medical database and labs for her research. It had been impossible for her to refuse.

And so she'd come.

Her office was located, interconnected, with the main medical facilities on the planet. It was also connected to the Jedi Temple where most of her patients came from. It was her specialty that had first made her an object of ridicule, and then respect, when it became obvious why.

Her specialty of choice was lightsaber injuries and severed limbs. And while severed limbs had a chance of being reattached properly in bacta, they stood a better chance if manually reattached and then immersed in bacta. Thankfully her patients were few and far between, and she could devote individual time to each one.

She finally looked up again. "Qui-Gon may have been the reason I started, Cordé, but he's not the reason I stay. I'm needed here; there are too few surgeons who can deal with these kinds of injuries."

"Touché." Cordé chuckled softly. "Relax, would you? I'm just saying you shouldn't feel bad when someone recovers thanks to your hard work. This job can be thankless enough as it is, don't borrow trouble, okay?"

Padmé nodded, pouring herself a cup of caf. "I'll take that advice. Do we have any surgeries scheduled for today?"

Cordé shook her head. "Nothing new... but then, most people don't plan on severing a limb."

Padmé paused and then blushed. "That sounds really heartless of me, doesn't it?"

"Just makes you more human." Cordé nodded to the holo broadcast that was playing in the corner as she took another bite of her lunch. "Have you been keeping track of this vote?"

"Vote?" Padmé looked at her blankly, trying to remember what was being discussed in the senate at the moment. With her focus on medicine and her patients, she didn't pay too much attention to the happenings in politics. In fact, you could almost say she avoided it entirely.

Cordé rolled her eyes. "For an ex-politician, you're sure uninformed."

"I try to keep my mind where it matters."

"Trust me." Cordé told her pointedly. "This matters." She turned up the volume on the holonet.

"...te today. Rumor has it they will be pushing the Chancellor to bring the breakaway systems back to the table. How they propose to do that is to be discussed at the senate meeting this evening. Bail Organa, the Senator of Alderaan, and Jar Jar Binks, the Senator of Naboo, have been the most vocal opposition to the rumors that force may have to be used in bringing the rogue systems back in line."

Cordé muted the holo news. “They’re voting on it in the meeting this afternoon, but I don’t think it will go anywhere. The senate seems to be split on the use of force.”

“Are the Jedi involved?”

“Not yet.” Cordé chuckled softly. “Still thinking about that young rogue who helped free your world?”

Padmé blushed. “I was fourteen. Having a crush on a man several years my senior is very natural. Besides, Obi-Wan was very handsome and dashing and very polite.”

“He’s also a Jedi.” Cordé pointed her fork at her friend again. “Are you just going to sip caf all break or do you intent to eat something too?”

“I got over Obi-Wan years ago.” She grinned, unrepentant. “Mothering me again, Cordé?”

“Someone has to. You don’t eat enough for a small child.”

“I’m just not hungry.” Her gaze traveled back to the holo news, but it had moved beyond the happenings in the senate — if the pictures were any indication.

Cordé moved from the table and to the storage unit. She pulled a ready-made salad from the crisper and collected an extra fork before putting them in front of Padmé. “Eat, or you won’t be doing your rounds this afternoon.”

Padmé looked at it amused. “Thanks, Cordé.”

Cordé waved away the thanks. “I just don’t want you fainting in surgery if one should come in this afternoon.”

Padmé chuckled softly. “Thanks anyway.” They ate in companionable silence for the next few minutes before Cordé was called away over the PA system. Padmé finished her salad before heading out for her afternoon rounds of the ward.

Sebastian was delighted when she cleared him for play time.

Padmé’s shift ended in the evening, and just before 2100 her relief and fellow specialist in deep entry wounds and severed limbs, Doctor Mishibu, arrived to speak with her. They went over the progress and regression of each patient, spending almost an hour to ensure nothing was missed.

Padmé handed over her notes and said her “Good Nights” before heading for the private lifts that led to the street and the nearby staff apartments. She took the lift down and headed out of the clinic at fifteen stories above street level. There, she crossed a bridge and punched in her access code. The door slid open and she stepped into another lift, hitting the top floor. The lift sped up quickly, and she closed her eyes, enjoying the ride, just wanting to slide into a nice hot bath and relax.

Her flat, included as a part of her incentive package, was a top floor masterpiece and more than she really needed. It had a kitchen, living area, outside terrace with speeder parking, three bedrooms, space for an office and large ’fresher with a sunken tub that could have seated four people.

She only ever used the terrace for watching the sun sets, one bedroom, the office, kitchen and 'fresher. On occasion she used her living area, but mostly just as a thoroughfare.

It was no different this evening.

Stepping into her apartment and out of her shoes, the door closed behind her. As she walked, she shed each piece of clothing. Her slacks. Her shirt. Her underclothes. Finally, as if planned, she was naked and standing at the door to her 'fresher. She stepped in and down, sinking into the tub as she reached out to turn on the water.

She pulled her hair down, shaking her head to free the mass from its daily shape, pins hitting the floor on the side of the tub with little "dings". Stretching out as the water crawled over her knees, she closed her eyes as she laid her head against the edge of the tub, the hot water soothing and relaxing tense muscles.

Finally, her tub full, her muscles relaxed, she allowed herself to feel the loss of the patient today. She allowed herself to let her professional barriers down, to acknowledge the hurt and the guilt that came with losing someone who put their trust in her, unspoken or not. She let herself feel for the patient's family. She allowed herself to view her patient as more than a patient, but a living, vibrant being who would no longer be.

And the tears came.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2

Padmé's routine stayed much the same over the course of the next several months. She did three more surgeries, two on younglings from the temple who'd obtained injuries during sparring practice, and sent Sebastian back for more training. The last was on an aid for a senator who had a mouth that just wouldn't quit. She made time now to watch the Holo news to see how the vote was proceeding; she made time to listen and it was here she caught the first hint of Jedi involvement.

Rumors circulated to their wing, despite the distance, of Jedi disappearing. Jedi doing espionage work for the Chancellor. She heard disturbing comments made by some of the staff, and the patients, of the Jedi wanting to overthrow the Chancellor.

Padmé didn't believe it. She still believed the Chancellor was a good man, guided by the principles she'd seen and honored when she'd done her term as Queen. However, she knew people could change and asked for an audience with him to discuss the matter.

Surprised when his aid, Sly Moore, arrived personally to escort her one evening at the end of her shift, the statuesque aid said little, standing off to the side as she read the missive, and ensured she entered the right sky car before taking a seat beside her. Padmé adjusted her sweater, wishing she'd had more time to prepare for seeing the man she'd come to think of as a friend. He'd done much for her and her profession.

Upon parking the sky car, Sly Moore lead her away from the lot, pointed her in the direction of the lift that would take her to Palpatine's meeting chamber, and disappeared.

Padmé paused inside the lift and took a critical look at herself. Her hair was braided simply in one long plait hanging down to the small of her back. Her slacks were dark, fashionable and professional, covering the tops of her flat, black slip-ons. Her sweater had been chosen for comfort and she removed it, hanging it over one arm. Her blouse was short sleeved and slightly chilly, but more professional than the sweater. She'd endure the chill.

The lift opened and she stepped out into the adjacent corridor.

Palpatine was visible through the open door to his office working on something or another, and looked up as the lift doors opened. A smile appeared on his face. "Ah! Doctor Nabberrie, please come in. Your request for a meeting was a pleasant surprise indeed!"

She returned the smile, striding into his room confidently and taking the hand he extended in both of hers. "It has been too long, Chancellor."

"Come, come, child. We spoke just under a year ago."

"At a convention." Arching an eyebrow at him, she took the seat he offered as he returned to his, behind his desk.

Palpatine chuckled. "I see your point, my dear. To what do I owe this honor?"

“You’re overdue for your physical.” She fought to keep a straight face. “This is a house call.”

He blinked, and then laughed softly. “You have a magnificent sense of humor, but you forgot your doctor’s bag.”

“I come with a concern, Chancellor. We hear many disturbing rumors in our wing of the medical ward. Most of them are admittedly nonsense,” she smiled faintly, indicating most were too absurd to repeat.

“But you were concerned enough to ask for an audience with me.”

She nodded reluctantly. “We’ve a new patient, one senators’ aid managed to be on the wrong end of a duel and had his hand removed. He’s speaking of a plot by the Jedi to over throw you.”

“Over throw me?” Palpatine laughed heartily. ‘My dear, the senate can ask for my abdication at any time. I have not accepted any emergency powers and we are not in crisis; I retire at the end of this year.’ He shook his head. “Surely you remember how the game works; it’s only been ten years.”

Padmé had the grace to blush. “I’m afraid with the rumors that you will be voted emergency powers, it lends them credence.”

“I would naturally accept whatever burden the republic had need of me to shoulder.” Palpatine assured her. “But I would also lay it down as soon as the emergency was over.”

“Then it’s not true that you’re using the Jedi as a secret and powerful espionage ring?”

Palpatine chuckled. “The Jedi govern themselves. As much as I like the idea of using them for my personal intelligence gathering, they would never agree to it. Master Yoda and Master Windu have made it quite clear I have no say in the happenings of the council.”

Padmé let out a relieved breath. “Then I’m sorry to have wasted your time, Chancellor.”

“Come, come, my dear.” He smiled. “My free time may be little, but a discussion with a colleague is never a waste. Especially not one who may one day need to save my life and limb.”

“I certainly hope that never becomes necessary, Chancellor.” She pushed to her feet. “I will take my leave; I know you’re busy.”

He rose to his feet. “You are more than welcome here, Padmé. Your presence is always refreshing.”

“Thank you, Chancellor.” She shook his extended hand and departed, unable to shake an uneasy feeling even though the discussion had addressed all of her issues to her satisfaction. She pushed the feeling away. Her role was surgeon, not diplomat, and she had to be content with the answer she’d received.

Padmé’s days passed quickly, and she spent what little free time she had at work. When not making her rounds, she made a point of visiting the play area and spending time with the

children, ensuring they had contact with adults other than their regular doctors.

In her off hours, when she wasn't falling into bed exhausted, she made doll clothing from old clothes. It didn't take long and the smiles from the girls in the intensive care ward was more than reward enough for her. They were always delighted to receive new clothing for their dolls, and while Padmé saw them infrequently, it helped bolster her beleaguered spirits when things just never seemed to go right.

It was during one such week, where three patients turned septic, one of them a child, that news of an impending war filtered down to the ward. In an already high stress environment, several of the nurses suffered breakdowns, forcing even more of a load onto the already taxed system.

Padmé had her hands full as her department was gutted for nurses, losing almost half of her staff as they were needed to take shifts in the rest of the hospital. She put her foot down, however, and refused to give up the two rotations on minimal staff. Her job may not be needed all the time, but the times it was necessary were the times where seconds and minutes counted.

Finally, word came down through official channels that they were looking for medics for the medical frigates. Doctors with Padmé's specialty were the first to be offered for they would be needed most. When she sent a request for information on the facilities, she received the answer she'd been expecting. Everything she asked for would be provided.

After careful consideration, she sent back word of her acceptance, knowing as she did that she would likely be sent into battles to assist grievously wounded soldiers. Soldiers who would need her expertise. It was what she'd chosen this profession to do; help others when they were being selfless in defending the innocent.

The Chancellor sent her his personal thanks for accepting the call, and informed her that the Jedi would have control of the army. It had been created for the republic, but no one except a Jedi would be able to command. They made the ideal leaders.

And so Padmé found herself waiting outside the Jedi Council chambers still wearing her lab coat so quickly had the summons come.

The ornate doors were massive, and she couldn't recall ever having been invited into the Temple before. She paced back and forth in front of the doors, wondering if she'd have time to get back and see how the two Jedi Padawans under her care were doing before her shift ended. Even if she didn't, she would still go see them. They were delightful children.

The doors were cracked and slowly opened to reveal the Jedi council, several of the seats unoccupied, and she was beckoned in by one of the two masters she recognized. Jedi were secretive, their numbers a carefully guarded secret; their Masters even more so.

Padmé couldn't stop the churning in her stomach, though she took a deep breath to calm her nerves. It was the same feeling she had before a difficult surgery. She stepped into the council chamber, inclining her head and upper body to the Masters as she stopped inside the doors.

"Afraid are you, Doctor Naberrie?"

Padmé put her hands into the deep pockets of her lab coat and managed a smile. “Nervous,” She admitted honestly. “It is an honor to be called before such an esteemed group.”

Most of the Jedi Masters didn’t appear to even acknowledge her compliment, though Mace Windu inclined his head in return. “Your work with our less fortunate members has made you something of a hero, Doctor Naberrie. We understand you have offered your professional services to aid the Republic’s cause.”

She inclined her head. “That is true, Master Windu. I fear there will be many injuries for my specialty in the event we do go to war.”

“Object to a field position, do you?”

“A field Medic, Master Yoda?” She cocked her head at him. “I think my talents would be wasted. Wars bring out the messiest of injuries. If dealt with quickly, by a skilled professional, the chance of not only saving the life, but the limb as well, is much higher. The field medics can do the preparations; they’re not difficult.”

“Then you would not object to training more staff.”

“No, Master, I would not.” She smiled faintly. “I fear one cannot learn my specialty in the time we have, but I can teach the basics to those who want to learn. How to prep a limb, to conserve it, so that it may be reattached once evacuation is an option.”

“And on non-humans?”

“The procedure is the same.”

“So certain are you?”

Padmé nodded. “Yes, Master Yaddle. On a microscopic level, most beings can have their ligaments and muscles identified. The matter in which blood, ichor or other life giving fluids are transferred through non-humans are all very similar. With time, and careful surgery, these too can be reattached. Bacta finishes the process; when the limb isn’t rejected by the body.”

“You have a high success rate, Doctor Naberrie.” Commented one of the other Masters. “Too high perhaps?”

“We are careful.” Her words were firm. “But we are not perfect and we do have our problems, as do any other areas of medicine. I assure you we do all we can to minimize the need to re-amputate once a limb has been reattached.”

“Reassuring this is. Confident you are.”

“I should be, Master.” Her smile didn’t change. “I have been working very hard on this since Master Jinn’s death on Naboo.”

“Your fault it is not, Doctor Naberrie.” Yoda told her pointedly. “Nothing you could have done to save him.”

“I know that, Master Yoda.” Padmé wondered if the Masters could sense her feelings of guilt on the matter; probably, they were the most powerful of the Jedi. “I was simply trying to reassure you that I am confident in my procedures. They are time consuming, depending on

the injury, yes, but when the alternative is a cybernetic that looks more robotic than natural, most would prefer to keep their own limb.”

“Then they should be more careful.” Mace steepled his fingers together. “The reason we asked you here is a delicate matter, Doctor Naberrie. Few know of it beyond this room.”

“I understand Master.” She didn’t need to tell him she knew all about confidentiality; it was a part of her professional oaths.

Mace continued. “Two of our Jedi have uncovered a plot to fracture the republic. They have been taken hostage by hostile separatist forces. We are mounting a rescue mission, one that will consist of mostly Jedi and the new army the Chancellor has commissioned. It is not yet known that this army is one of clones.”

“Clones?” She gasped, taken aback.

“Yes, clones.” Mace regarded her carefully. “Master Yoda departs this evening for Kamino to retrieve the first wave. I will be taking what Jedi we have to rescue Obi-Wan and his apprentice.”

Padmé’s face must have given her away for she felt the ripple of surprise from the Masters. She fought to keep the blush off her face. “Obi-Wan Kenobi?”

“Remember him, do you?”

“It’s hard to forget when you get someone’s Master killed, Master Yoda.”

Yoda didn’t comment further, and Mace resumed speaking. “We want you to accompany the Jedi, Doctor Naberrie. We will have casualties; the opponents we’re fighting are droids. I fear there is also a Jedi, who is not longer a Jedi, involved as well.”

“You’re expecting someone to fight him and come away injured.” It wasn’t a question.

“Count Dooku is a dangerous and skilled opponent.” Mace replied calmly. “Unless one of us Masters fights him, yes; I expect casualties.”

“Then I accept.”

“Think on this you must. Ask this lightly, we do not.”

“There’s nothing to think about, Masters.” She pulled her hands from her pockets and bowed to them. “I will gather my team and meet you on the landing pad in less than one standard hour. We will be equipped to offer care as field medics, as well as surgery once evacuation from the planet is possible. I trust that will not be too long of a delay.”

“One hour, Doctor.”

She nodded, and turned to leave. On the threshold she paused, turning back slightly. “One last thing. I understand you have Jedi healers. If they know anything about conventional medicine, they’d prove to be invaluable.”

Mace nodded, “I will ensure they are on hand to assist you, Doctor.”

“Thank you.” Padmé departed, heading straight back towards where the skycar that had brought her had been left. She had less than an hour to gather her supplies and her team.

Breaking into a run, not caring if it looked undignified, she knew what had to be done and she had much to do in that hour.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3

Padmé crouched down in the corridor, the blaster sweaty in her palm as she peeked out into the arena. The Jedi were defending the spot, semi-circled around in a protective barrier as Padmé's team administered first aid to the wounded and dying.

Things had not gone according to plan.

The Jedi had landed and crept into a massive area where thousands upon thousands of bug-like creatures were cheering on two beasts. In the center of the arena, Obi-Wan Kenobi — she'd have recognized his fighting style anywhere — and what had to be his Padawan, were putting up a tremendous fight.

Something about the younger of the two Jedi kept drawing her gaze. Unable to put her finger on it, the way he moved was powerful and purposeful; like a predator and she swore she'd seen him before even as she knew she hadn't. She would have remembered him for sure. Obi-Wan, however, moved like a dancer, graceful and fluid.

Not that she had time to ogle the Jedi.

The Jedi Knights sent to rescue the two endangered Jedi had managed to cut the power to the droids, but the Geonosians — for that's what she'd learned they were — had come back at strength. They'd swarmed, massed towards the Jedi, driving them back into a corner of the arena where they'd been able to surround them. Mostly. Their plan had a flaw, and Padmé's hiding spot was it. The Geonosians couldn't get to the wounded with the Jedi having formed a defensive barrier around the cave.

But, regardless, they were stuck, even as the corridor lent shelter for Padmé's team, it was a dead end. They were trapped.

Padmé watched as the remaining Jedi twirled and fought, blocking, diving and dodging as they kept the massive swarm at bay. She leveled her blaster, aiming at one that was taking a bead on Obi-Wan's apprentice, and pulled the trigger. The creature shrieked, mortally wounded, and crashed to the ground. The apprentice managed to send a flash of a dashing smile her way, but she had no time to appreciate it as the Geonosians swarmed again, pushing the Jedi back further.

And then, as that final press came, suddenly it ended. Geonosians shrieked as powerful laser beams cut in from the sky, obliterating dozens in single shots.

Transports and gun ships descended into the arena, scattering the Geonosians as they headed for the remaining Jedi.

Padmé dashed from her hiding place, one of the Jedi healers at her side, and made a beeline for two wounded Jedi lying on the fringe of the protective circle. Two more of her medical team were close on their heels. They dropped in pairs to each Jedi, quickly checking vitals and applying techniques to stop the pain and bleeding.

Padmé lunged across the body of the Jedi she was treating as dust was kicked up around them, protecting the wound from contamination. “Shut that blasted thing off and get these people loaded. Move it!”

Clones dropped from the transport that landed almost directly beside her, obeying her orders without hesitation. The dust settled and she left the other medic to finish dressing the wound. She surged to her feet. “You, Trooper.”

“Yes Ma’am?”

“Get ten of your men and follow me. We have more wounded in the corridor.” She headed back for the corridor and the number of troopers she’d requested were quick to follow. The other six remaining members of her medical team were still busy dressing wounds. There were more than twice the number of wounded than medics.

“Alright troopers, each of you assist a patient. Quickly now, we need to get these Jedi into bacta as soon as possible.”

“Understood.”

Padmé organized a system so that the troopers who came in were quickly loaded with another wounded Jedi. Unfortunately, most of the injuries were leg or foot injuries, making it awkward to move them quickly. They had the cavern cleared after long minutes, just as the Genosians regained their courage for another dive at the site. The airborne transports and gun ships fired volleys to keep them at bay as the last of the wounded were loaded.

“Spin her up and get them back to the medical frigate!”

“Yes, ma’am.” The trooper at the controls followed her order, quickly launching the machine back into the sky as soon as the engine was warm.

She watched it leave, taking up the blaster again as she turned to fire at those Genosians that hadn’t been deterred by the aerial bombardment. Another ship landed, and she and the remaining two of her medics were pulled aboard along with the last of the troopers.

The able-bodied Jedi were nowhere in sight.

Padmé hooked her hand through one of the ceiling straps, leaning down towards one of the troopers. “Where did the Jedi go?”

“They’re after a speeder bike. Currently in hot pursuit.”

“Is it Count Dooku?”

“Unknown.” The soldier fired a shot as the ship moved further away.

“Pilot!” Padmé’s tone brooked no disobedience.

“Ma’am?”

“Take me to the Jedi!”

“Roger. Hold on.”

“Doctor Naberrie, shouldn’t we head back to help deal with the influx of patients?”

Padmé cast a glance at her team member. “Larissa, one reason I was asked to come is because of the threat that particular Jedi poses to life and limb. If I’m back on the ship there’s no guarantee someone on surface will be able to deal with this properly. That’s why I’m here.”

Larissa nodded reluctantly, settling back in the cargo area.

The sandy, rocky planes flashed by well beneath the transport, and Padmé’s nerves were beginning to fray when the pilot suddenly veered away. “Pilot!”

The trooper gave no sign he’d heard as they descended towards a massing area. The droids were back online, advancing towards a wave of clones, the multi colored fire fight an almost beautiful dance.

“Pilot!” Padmé raised her voice. “I said to get me to those Jedi!”

“We have wounded ma’am. Your team members can be of use here.”

Padmé wasn’t about to object when it was put so humanely, though the delay grated on her nerves. The ship didn’t touch the ground and Larissa and her companion were already being helped from the ship. Padmé threw them each their depleted packs. “Call the ship for more; the clones should have their own.”

Larissa threw hers back at Padmé. “You’ll likely need it more than I will. Good luck, Doctor!”

Padmé didn’t have time to reply, or object, as the two medics disappeared and the ship banked away from the battle, back into the skies. She shouldered the pack along side her own, and renewed her grip on the strap. “Quickly Pilot, time is of the essence.”

The trooper did little more than nod, but the transport didn’t accelerate further. Padmé simply had to accept that they were going as fast as they could. She only hoped they wouldn’t be too late.

The sound of a lightsaber duel in progress was clearly audible from the landing zone as Padmé dropped from the transport. The medical kits bounced against her back as she headed towards the noise at a run. “Follow me.”

The troopers, blasters in hand, were quick on her heels. Padmé rounded one corner just as Obi-Wan was struck, a lightsaber slicing deeply into the flesh of his thigh. He fell back with a cry, leaving his Padawan to battle the Jedi who was no longer a Jedi — Count Dooku — alone. Padmé looked for an opening to get to the wounded Obi-Wan, knowing if she didn’t move quickly the wound would close by itself. Lightsaber wounds were easiest to treat fresh. Amazed, she watched as he threw his lightsaber towards his Padawan.

“Anakin!”

The name rang a bell in her head, but she couldn’t place it; didn’t even try as she looked for an opening to get to Obi-Wan quickly.

Anakin caught the lightsaber, igniting it as he did, moving into a blazing twirl of light as he forced Dooku to parry first up and then down, his hands seeming to move independently of each other as he forced Dooku to give ground.

Padmé took the opportunity and darted for Obi-Wan, sliding the last two feet on her knees to beside him. His surprised look was barely registered as she tore the fabric of his pants away from his leg and opened her kits. She ignored his stammered protest and he sucked in a sharp breath as she applied a solvent, quickly dissolving the semi-charred scabs and stopping the flesh from closing. Quick to follow was a bacta patch, sealing the wound closed until she could get him back to the medical frigate.

Obi-Wan's gaze had moved beyond her once he'd figured out what she was doing, back to his Padawan. He even offered encouragement, though his voice was laced with pain. She turned her head as the Clones began firing at Count Dooku, Anakin's duel lightsabers having blocked him into a corner, his face a mask of concentration and poise. He was completely lost in the Force, caught up in the duel.

Then, Dooku's lightsaber turned, dipping, and caught the green blade's hilt, knocking it from Anakin's hand in two pieces. Anakin's hand, thankfully, didn't go with it. She gasped, searching the floor for fingers, but couldn't see the area clearly from her angle. She took the Padawan's continued fight to mean he was unharmed.

Dooku took the initiative, forcing Anakin on the defensive as they both whirled and twirled, parrying, counterstriking and defending in a blur of motion that left her breathless. Blaster bolts danced around them, forcing both Jedi to weave and dance to avoid them.

"Cease fire!" She snapped the order as Anakin was forced to deflect several bolts intended for Dooku.

The troopers did as she ordered, but her voice had distracted Anakin. His concentration broke for a split second, his gaze darting towards her almost incredulously; as if he hadn't realized she was there, and in that moment Dooku struck.

Padmé watched in slow motion horror as Dooku's lightsaber dived for Anakin's torso. "Look out!"

Anakin shifted, barely missing the killing blow, and instead was struck on the upper right arm. The lightsaber easily cleaved through bone and tendon, dropping the hand holding Anakin's lightsaber to the ground. His left arm came up and was cut through at the forearm as he attempted to push the lightsaber away in a defensive reaction. His body quickly followed the severed arms as the sudden shock of losing the limbs brought him to his knees, what was left of his arms hanging uselessly at his sides.

"NO!" Padmé shrieked, appalled at having been the cause of such an injury. She was supposed to prevent them! And she'd left her blaster back on the transport. "Fire, kill him, don't let Dooku escape!"

Dooku darted away, heading straight for the ship that lay in its docking berth, as a rain of bolts showered around him. He deflected them back towards the troopers, into the ceiling, to his feet, only bothering with those that would have hit him. His lightsaber worked a furious shield of energy around his body as he headed for safety.

Padmé didn't stop to think as she leapt to her feet, sprinting for Anakin's side the moment Dooku left it. She almost tripped as she scrambled to kneel at his side. His hands were nearby, and she scooped them up, putting them on her lap as she quickly examined the wounds. She applied the same solvent to Anakin's injury she had to Obi-Wan's before quickly wrapping a bandage around the right arm stump.

Anakin was unconscious, thankfully, and she worked quickly, slapping a preservation patch over the end of the stump before working on the left arm. She worked quickly, repeating the process of bandaging and prepping. She didn't have the time to waste to see how the chase was progressing; seconds counted if she wanted to be able to give Anakin back his arms.

The whine of Dooku's ship powering up was her only warning and she threw herself across Anakin, sheltering his body from the sudden heat, ensuring that it wouldn't scorch flesh. He whimpered in her ear, and she closed her eyes against the pitiful sound.

The troopers ceased firing as the ship blasted out of the hangar and Padmé began issuing orders the moment the sound died. "Get me a vehicle, stat! I don't care what kind, but this man needs to be in surgery in less than thirty minutes. Move it, troopers! Get the other Jedi to the transport and into bacta! Now!"

They hopped to do her bidding; one — the company medic — knelt to help her with Anakin's injuries. They worked swiftly, the trooper assisting her with the prep work for the severed limbs as they waited for the transport. It felt like hours, but was in reality barely minutes, before it landed in the place Dooku's ship had vacated. Padmé enlisted the help of all the clone troopers to get Obi-Wan and Anakin on board and off the ground.

Time was ticking if she wanted to save Anakin's arm. She owed it to him; she'd been the one to cause his injury. She'd distracted him at a crucial time; she'd been the reason Dooku had been able to inflict such damage and escape. Continuing to work on the injuries and ensuring the blood flow was slowed but not stopped, she was ceaseless as the ship climbed for the medical frigate and her lab.

The image of his injuries, as they were being inflicted, overlaid themselves on the wounds she tended and, in the back of her mind, Padmé knew she'd be dreaming about them for a long, long time. For now, she had to get Anakin into surgery and do what she could to undo the damage her impulsive actions had caused.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4

Padmé took only long enough to scrub her arms down, pull on her scrubs and gloves before entering surgery. They'd reached the medical frigate with only ten minutes to spare. Ten minutes in which they needed to get both limbs reattached to blood flow. As she'd been prepping, the nurses that had come with her from her practice were administering blood to both Anakin and the severed limbs.

Blood that would give her the time she needed to work. She missed Cordé's stoic and solemn, but highly competent and capable presence. Having to instruct while trying to focus on the task at hand only widened her margin for error. She repaired his left arm first, knowing she would need to spend more time on the right, and worked quickly. Due to the nature of the injury, as well as the location, it was one of the easiest surgeries she ever did.

She didn't hesitate, didn't stop to admire her work as the bacta was being applied in liberal quantities to promote speedy healing. She stepped right up and around Anakin's body, to stand in front of his other arm and got to work.

A sponge dabbed at the sweat dotting her brow as she made the final micro stitches and carefully connected the last of the severed nerves in his right arm. Carefully, with slow movements, she pulled the pieces of the arm back together and, with micro scissors, cut the last of the filaments used to suture the nerves together.

The wound was then closed completely with a bacta wrap and Padmé stepped away. Finally, her work completed, her shoulders aching with exhaustion, she allowed herself to look into his face.

Anakin. He was a handsome young man, with brownish-blond hair falling into his eyes, his skin pale. His dark lashes were unfairly long, teasing the tops of his cheeks where they rested, as he hadn't yet awakened. A memory teased the back of her mind, but she was so drained from the surgery she couldn't focus on it; couldn't see what it was trying to tell her about this young man.

She fought off the guilt at having helped inflict such damage to one so young. She managed to smile through the exhaustion and nodded to her nurse. "Take him to the bacta tank. A few of days will adequately heal the outside of both seems; time and luck will tell how much mobility he regains and if he'll ever use either hand again."

"Luck? Don't you mean the Force?"

"If that helps him, I'll subscribe to it." The nurse wheeled the Jedi out of the room, and Padmé rotated her shoulders to ease the tension.

"Doctor Naberrie?"

"Yes?" She looked up to find another of her nurses on the threshold of the operating room.

The nurse smiled apologetically. "Jedi Kenobi still requires a moment of your time. We believe we have the injury adequately cleansed and sealed, but we need your opinion."

She nodded, stripping her gloves from her hands and dropping them in the disposal before pulling on new ones. She followed the nurse into the next room, noting that someone had cut the fabric she'd torn from Obi-Wan's legs, his white skin visible from the top of his knee-high boots to almost being indecent. The other leg had been left alone so he looked like he was wearing mismatched shorts.

"You look exhausted."

She managed to find a smile for him. "Anakin's out of surgery and has been put into bacta. We'll have to wait a few days to see if his body will heal or not. He may still lose both hands."

"With your reputation, Doctor, I'm sure that won't happen."

Looking down at his wound, Padmé examined it carefully as she avoided his gaze. She felt guilty enough as it was. She only hoped Anakin's wounds wouldn't turn septic and need to be removed once more. She still couldn't place the memory, the persistent, nagging memory that was eating at her consciousness. "It's well sealed and closed."

"You have nurses with gentle hands, milady."

Padmé chuckled softly. "They have to, Jedi Kenobi."

"Master, actually." He smiled at her blank expression. "I may not sit on the council, but I do teach Padawans. The title is one of respect."

"Master Kenobi, then."

"Has it been so long, Padmé?" His voice was gentle. "You may call me Obi-Wan. We were friends once."

"I regret we have to be reunited under such unfortunate circumstances." She took a deep breath. "Tragedy appears to follow us both."

"In this instance, Anakin's tragedy is narrowly averted by your choice of profession. Not something to be ashamed about."

She stepped away. "Anakin." She tested his name, the memories that had been teasing her suddenly coming to the forefront, blossoming as she realized where she knew him from. "Surely he's not the same Anakin who had a part in saving Naboo."

"The same." Obi-Wan's smile was faint. "I'm surprised you didn't recognize him."

She blushed. "It *has* been ten years and he's changed quite a bit, Obi-Wan. So have you."

Obi-Wan chuckled, acknowledging the comment with a nod of his head. "All Anakin's influence, I assure you." He paused, before speaking softly. "It's not your fault, you know."

She arched an eyebrow at him, pulling off her gloves. "What isn't?"

"Anakin's injury."

Padmé paused in removing her glove before it snapped off and she threw them into the disposal bin. “I beg to differ, but my guilt won’t help Anakin heal. Nor you. I want you into bacta for the night, possibly the day tomorrow.”

“I have a report to make to the council.”

“It can wait.” She looked at him pointedly, her tone leaving no room for discussion or negotiation.

Obi-Wan held up his hands in surrender. “Yes, Doctor. Will you make my apologies for me?”

“If you’re a good little Jedi.” Padmé’s tease was light. “If you’ll excuse me, Master Kenobi, I have other Jedi that I need to see before I make my report to the council. I expect to see you floating in a pink sea when I return.”

He didn’t argue as she left the room. One of her nurses appeared with a datapad in hand as she strode towards the disinfection station. “Doctor, I have the preliminary reports of the wounded.”

Padmé nodded and inhaled deeply as she stepped into the decontamination center and began scrubbing down. The familiar routine pushed her guilt from her mind, restoring her equilibrium as the surgery hadn’t. It reminded her of who she was and why she was here. *Anakin’s injury could have been inflicted regardless of my involvement.* She admonished herself silently, knowing she had to believe she hadn’t been the cause or risk making further mistakes. *My presence was requested, needed, in the event of such injuries. It was lucky I was there or he may never have been able to have had the opportunity to regain the use of those limbs!* Somehow, she just couldn’t tell herself convincingly enough that she wasn’t at least partially to blame.

“Doctor?”

“Go ahead,” she focused on the nurse as she disposed of the soiled surgical garments and began scrubbing her hands and arms vigorously.

The nurses’ voice was clinical, detached, but Padmé could hear the weariness in it. Her team was small and skilled, but hardly equipped to deal with so many serious injuries all at once. “We have thirteen Jedi, not including Master Kenobi and Padawan Skywalker, who are currently in serious to critical condition. Nine more were treated for injuries and are being kept for observation and six more were released after treatment.”

“That’s thirty Jedi including Kenobi and Skywalker.” Padmé couldn’t keep the shock from her voice.

“Yes, Doctor.” The nurse exhaled almost dejectedly.

“And the dead?”

“At least number were lost today.” The nurse swallowed hard. “That’s only the Jedi. I have at least twice, if not three times, that number of dead troopers, and at least twice that many wounded troopers.”

“How are the staff holding up?”

“We’re dealing with the most serious first. You had the worst of it with Padawan Skywalker’s injuries. He’s the only one to lose a limb today.” She hesitated. “Other injuries include blaster wounds that would have been fatal if we hadn’t been on the ground with them to administer treatment.”

Padmé patted her hands dry and shrugged into one of the nearby lab coats, taking the datapad from the weary nurse. “Mik, get some sleep. You’re dead on your feet.”

“But, there are more to be seen...” She trailed off, seeing the determination in Padmé’s gaze.

“You’re no good to them if you’re not rested. You’ve been on shift since before *I* arrived for shift yesterday. Get some sleep. Once you’ve had eight hours of sack time, we’ll start battle rotations. Go.”

“But—”

Padmé put the datapad in her pocket and grabbed the nurse by her shoulders, turning her bodily and propelling her gently into the hallway. “That’s an order, Mik. Sleep.”

Mik’s shoulder dropped and she made to obey. No one questioned that tone of Padmé’s. Especially not a triage nurse who owed her posting to the Doctor. She departed with slow steps as Padmé turned her attention to the records, checking the datapad and scrolling through the names of the Jedi. She checked their injuries for the most serious and headed off towards the Intensive Care section of the frigate’s medical center.

She wasn’t stopped in the hallway, but the moans and groans of the wounded soldiers were indication enough of the work load her staff was under. She made a point of dropping in on those that had been on the job as long as Mik and ordering them to quarters. Each one offered complaints and objections, but her orders weren’t to be questioned and, reluctantly, each departed their quarters.

Padmé made a point of pulling in any of the medics assigned to the squadrons who were not on active duty, and put them to work on the least serious of the troopers injuries.

In all, she sent ten staff to bed and gained eight.

It freed her up to begin her rounds of the most seriously injured, which she began in the bacta lab.

They had fifty tanks, ten rooms of five, and every tank was full. Her heart sank as she examined some of the injuries that had put the Jedi and troopers into her care.

Blaster bolts, claw wounds and one had been partially eviscerated, if the line of neat stitches from navel to neck was any indication. She carefully checked each patient off her list, making notes as she went, ensuring each one was slotted for the time in the bacta that would be needed to mostly heal their wounds. For some, like Anakin and the eviscerated Jedi, they would need to be in the tanks until their scars were little more than a memory if they were to heal completely.

She stopped by Anakin’s tank, spreading her fingers on the glass as she watched him floating in the pink haze. His eyes were closed, his breathing monitored, and assisted, by

machines. The monitors on the side were specifically hooked up to check for blood flow through the body, and all the lights were green.

“Still think I’m an angel?” She whispered softly, feeling her throat close. She’d done this to him, landed him in intensive care when he should have been the one to win the battle with Dooku. She closed her eyes momentarily, pushing the thought away. Dooku had inflicted the wounds; she had simply been a spectator regardless of her actions.

The glass was cool under her touch, though she knew his body had burned with fever; she simply hadn’t had time to think about it while trying to save his arms. She opened her eyes, staring at his floating form, and pulled her hand away, checking the monitors to ensure the staff had set them up correctly. She made a note on her chart. Anakin would be in the bacta for several days. Each day, after twenty four hours, she would need to check his arms to ensure the blood flow didn’t change.

Time would tell if her efforts had been enough.

She felt reluctant to leave Anakin’s side. Unsurprising, she justified silently, since she had done few double arm reattachments. Yet, she forced herself to keep moving. If Anakin had been the only patient, she might have felt comfortable sitting there for hours, monitoring him carefully, ensuring things were going as planned.

But he wasn’t her only patient, and there was a war now, courtesy of the Trade Federation and their breakaway factions. She continued through the rooms, firmly keeping her mind focused on the tasks at hand. The last batch of tanks, the final ten, held the least of those most seriously injured. Obi-Wan was in one of these, floating serenely in the pink liquid, his eyes closed. They opened as she approached, clear behind the goggles provided for all patients.

He gave her a wave of his hand to indicate he’d seen her before his eyes closed once more. She swore she could feel him slipping back into some kind of trance. She checked his injury through the glass and made a slight adjustment to his time. He’d be out within the next couple of hours.

Her rounds of the critical completed, she headed for the seriously injured patients for which she didn’t yet have room in bacta. She’d given orders that any that could be sedated, be sedated, to encourage sleeping and promote healing. Except the Jedi. The Jedi healers had walked among them, sending them into healing trances that, they said, would allow them to heal faster than the troopers.

Padmé had made sure all the Jedi, no matter how minimally wounded, had ended up in the tanks. With the Jedi healers intervention, it was possible those tanks would be available for more seriously injured clones within hours.

Padmé’s rounds were completely quickly, and all of the Jedi and worst of the troopers wounds checked. Tending the troopers, that same face time after time, sent shivers of unease down her spine. She made notes on her rotation schedule, making sure no one nurse or Doctor spent more than two consecutive days tending clones. If several hours of staring into the same face and dealing with different wounds taxed her professional outlook, it would certainly push her staff to their limits in no time.

She also noted the need for more Medics from among the troopers; *they* didn’t seem to think it was odd treating their fellow clones. She worked as she walked, noting things that

needed to be done, and things that would need to be changed in the next several days. She finally checked her chrono and pushed an errant lock of her hair from her face, feeling as weary as some of her staff looked.

She had one last duty before she could retire. She had to report to Masters Yoda and Windu, the only members of the council with the fleet, as to how their people were doing. As she headed for the docking port and the shuttle that was to ferry her over to the main command ship, her thoughts were back in the medical bay with the gravely wounded young man whose life might depend on the surgery she'd preformed.

"Thirty?" Mace's voice betrayed his shock. "You have thirty Jedi in your ward?"

Padmé nodded wearily. "That includes Master Kenobi and Padawan Skywalker. I've two of your healers who are on that list as well for attempting to get to their comrades before it was prudent to do so." She paused and then forged ahead, knowing time wouldn't make the last of her news easy to deliver. "I also have thirty seven dead, of whom I have no list of next-of-kin to contact."

"Discourage family contact, we do." Yoda told her matter-of-factly. "To the family of the Jedi do they belong. Cremated they will be, as is the tradition of the Jedi."

"I understand Master." Padmé looked from one to the other. "And what of Count Dooku?"

"His ship was shot down in orbit as it attempted to leave the planet." Mace's reply was calm. "He will cause no further problems for the Jedi or the Republic. Of that we are certain."

Padmé felt as if a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders. "That should be the end of this, then?"

"I wish it were that simple, Doctor." Mace's words held a note Padmé could only identify as regretful. "Even with Dooku gone, the Trade Federation and the separatists have many allies. I fear this is only the beginning."

"And the people I will need to train as Medics?"

"They're en-route as we speak." Mace regarded her carefully. "How soon before some of those Jedi are able bodied again?"

"With the help of the Jedi healers, it may be days, even hours before they're healed." She paused. "But I fear only six to eight of them will be well enough to leave our care."

"More you cannot do?"

"I'm sorry, Master Yoda, but even Jedi need time to heal. Padawan Skywalker will be under my care for many weeks before he is able to return to his regular duties."

"Weeks?"

Padmé nodded. "Weeks, Master Windu. Reattaching a limb, in this case two, is never easy and it's not to be trifled with. If I release him once the scars have faded, he may turn septic if his body decides to reject the limbs. He would begin to rot from the inside out, poisoning his body incrementally until it would eventually kill him. Then there is rehabilitation as the brain

must relearn how to use the hands, training and strengthening. No, I'm sorry, but Skywalker will be out for weeks, if not months."

"And Kenobi?"

Padmé smiled faintly. "He's one of the six to eight. He should be out of the bacta in a couple of hours. I was asked to bring his apologies for not discharging his duties first; as his Doctor, I had him order him into a tank before coming to see you."

"And if we miss out on a tactical opportunity because of this?"

Padmé tilted her chin defiantly, crossing her arms over her chest as she planted her feet. "So be it. I am a Doctor, Master Windu. I do what's best for my patients. Your agenda must come second to their welfare."

"Criticize you, we do not. Grateful we are, so diligent are you." Yoda assured her. "Wait, we can, for Obi-Wan's report."

Padmé inclined her head. "If you'll excuse me Masters, I have patients and an overworked staff to return to." She turned smartly on her heel and departed, stuffing her data pad into her pocket as she went.

The next days were hectic as troopers were rotated out of the bacta tank, the most seriously injured replacing those who were done as they came in from battles, both land and space.

Most of the Jedi, twenty of them, were released back to service, Obi-Wan among them, the Jedi healing trances having been the most effective of the treatments offered. Padmé's staff dwindled further as the Jedi removed their healers from her service, reassigning them to where they were most needed.

Padmé couldn't blame the council, and she quashed those among her staff who attempted to. The Jedi looked out for their own. Even if it did mean her staff was working longer shifts. Slowly, as the first official days of the war wore on, recruits for medical help filed in. More Doctors were brought in from loyal worlds to help the beleaguered medical staff.

Padmé refused to be relieved. She'd set a grueling rotation, slotting the newest in at the earliest opportunities and sending those close to exhaustion to their beds. She marshaled and organized, making sure everyone who came in was seen in a timely manner as much as possible.

Clones were triaged quickly by their own men. They were impartial and completely dedicated to her orders. The sickest were seen first, those with minor wounds treated at triage stations before entering the medical bay, if at all. It only halved her work load, but it was enough to slowly be catching up, to discharge patients, and after a week, begin seeing empty bacta tanks.

Anakin Skywalker's recovery, however, was slower going than Padmé had hoped. The left arm was healing nicely; the right was fighting. She spent what hours she could adjusting the flow of fluids to his body, attempting to bring the levels to acceptable ones for his body to accept his limb. She attempted to bleed him, going so far as to re-open the wound one

evening to repair damage she could see through the skin. The second surgery appeared to help and color returned to the arm.

But only briefly.

Anakin didn't regain consciousness either, a state that was proving worrisome for the Medical staff, Padmé in particular. Had she missed something while repairing his arms, something that had happened to his head? Or was he willfully sedentary, not willing to face the reality of possibly missing both hands? Could he even feel the left, so quickly was it healing?

Padmé's collapse as she adjusted the fluid levels the sixth day after Anakin's surgery was witnessed by several nurses and one of the new doctors. They rushed to get her, barely saving her from tumbling head first to the floor and possibly becoming a patient herself.

When questioned, Mik revealed that she hadn't seen Padmé sleep in more than five, possibly six days. The new doctor ordered she be put to bed and that she was to sleep herself out. Padmé, exhausted beyond all measure, didn't hear the order consciously and when she twisted in silent protest, the doctor prescribed a sedative. She wasn't to be woken for anything. Reluctantly, the nurses obeyed.

It was how Padmé slept through the second amputation of Anakin Skywalker's right arm.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5

She woke with a start, the silence almost unnatural in her quarters, unable to identify the sense of urgency that had awoken her. She rubbed one hand across eyes that were almost crusted shut. What time was it? She blinked, pushing her hair out of her face and focused on the chrono.

0200. She hadn't over slept; her shift began in another three hours. She yawned, her sleep fogged brain pleasantly cobwebbed as she marveled at the revitalizing power of eight hours of sleep. She stretched, wincing at the tightness through her shoulders and back, rolling her head back and forth. She felt like she'd slept for a week.

She pushed out of bed, the cobwebs slowly receding as she pulled her robe on, stepping towards the small fresher for a glass of water. She caught sight of her reflection in the mirror and stopped. She was still in her clothes. She frowned, wondering if she'd been so tired when she'd finally stumbled to bed that she'd forgotten to remove her clothes once she'd...

Anakin.

Her eyes widened as the events of the last several days came back to her, clearer than she'd have thought possible. The glass she'd been lifting to her lips dropped from nerveless fingers and landed with a *clink* in the sink. Her last waking memory, changing the mixture of the fluid in Anakin's IV, rushed back. She'd never finished it!

Her knees buckled and she slid to the ground, her back against the wall. She'd never finished the adjustment that could have saved his arm. Had the nurse seen what she'd been doing? Had they been able guess at her intentions?

She closed her eyes. How could she have let exhaustion overcome her at such a critical juncture? She'd been so close, so close! Her hand pounded on the floor, for she knew as sure as the sickening sensation in her stomach, that Anakin's arm would have been removed to prevent damage to the rest of his body. Her eyes flew open and she pushed herself to her feet, unable to meet her own gaze in the mirror. She didn't know how long she'd been sleeping, but it was high time she returned to duty.

With sure hands, she disrobed and stepped into the sonic shower. First, she needed to be clean.

Freshly bathed and braced for the changes that would be certain to greet her, her hair tied back in a no-nonsense braid that was wrapped securely about her head in case of surgery, Padmé went searching. First she looked for, and found, Mik.

Mik's eyes brightened momentarily and then became shuttered. "Doctor Naberrie. Are you feeling better?"

"I'm well rested, Mik." She didn't keep the bite from her tone. "Who's been in charge?"

"Doctor Helkor." Mik pointed down the corridor. "He's usually found in the bacta ward, Doctor. You might try looking for him there."

"Thank you, Mik." Padmé turned and headed for the bacta ward. Her flat heels echoed through the deck plates as each struck, almost foreboding in their tone. She entered the first of the rooms. Doctor Helkor had his head down, his head tails tied neatly behind his back, examining the datapad in his hand. She stopped just inside the doorway.

"I trust everything has gone according to plan in my absence."

Doctor Helkor's head tails twitched in annoyance, but his expression was pleasant, if strained, when he turned to face her. "Doctor Naberrie. Welcome back to the land of the living."

"I was hardly dead Hel—" she sucked in a sharp breath, finally registering who was floating in the tank behind him. Anakin, his arm amputated along the same line where the lightsaber had cut, his eyes still closed, his body limp. The amputation was only partially healed. "What have you done to him?"

"Saved his life." Helkor's reply was dry. "I'm afraid that you were beyond capable at that point, my dear, and we had to take the arm lest he become contaminated by the poisons. Your procedures are not always successful."

Bile rose in the back of her throat as she looked at the young man who had once been so vibrant. His skin color was bad, pale and almost gray even through the bacta. She pushed Helkor aside, checking the fluid levels and the balance and cursed his ineptitude. "Are you daft, Helkor? No wonder you had to take the limb, the balance in this tank is all wrong; it's contaminated. Are you trying to kill him? Nurse!"

Her voice cracked like a whip as Helkor bristled at her accusation. But Padmé had no time for him as she pulled the emergency release on the bacta tank, draining it to halfway so they could pull Skywalker out. He was limp, almost lifeless except for the strength of his breath pulling in and out of the respirator. Padmé didn't dare remove it as she had a sneaky suspicion if she did he would stop breathing all together.

She couldn't lose him now. She refused to.

The Nurses flittered about, moving with purpose as Padmé demanded, and retrieved towels and various medications. She put two nurses to work rubbing Anakin down, to rid him of the almost toxic mess that now coated his skin. Padmé checked the dosages on the medications she'd ordered, completely ignoring the silent, hulking disapproval of Helkor as she focused solely on Anakin.

"Mik, get me more syringes. Lina the arm; make sure you get all of the bacta off it. We don't want to risk further infection. No, Ken! New towels. Incinerate these once they're soaked. He needs electrolytes and I need more solution!"

Padmé finished her injections and tuned her attention to Anakin's stump, receiving a clear view of the red, infected tissue for the first time since he'd been pulled from the tank. The nurses had cleaned away the contaminated bacta and the blood had begun to ooze from the wound again.

“Helkor, get your butt into the operation room and get it prepped. Move man, do you want to compound your mistake with a loss of life?”

Helkor was spurred into action by the staccato, rapid fire orders Padmé’s no nonsense tone indicated. He pulled two nurses from their rotations and headed straight for the surgery. Padmé had two of the nurses that were already helping her with Anakin bring over a nearby stretcher and had them assist her in lifting him onto it. Within moments they were carrying him towards the surgical suite.

Padmé could only hope they weren’t too late.

Beep.

Beep.

Padmé checked the readings on the monitors as the last of the tissues in Anakin’s arm was sealed, closing the stump off from air and contaminants. She breathed a soft sigh of relief behind the surgical mask, double checking the stitches.

Anakin’s color had improved during the surgery as the infection had been bled and forced from his system, his vital fluids replaced. His color was pale, but healthy, without the grayish tinge. She’d even removed him from the respirator, and found his breathing to be even and deep.

She stepped back. “Cover the end with a bacta seal and place him in a private room. He’s not to be disturbed until that wound seals over.”

“Yes, Doctor.” Mik’s voice was slightly muffled by her mask. She began sealing the newly patched stump with a cone like instrument designed to focus bacta and circulate it to the part it was needed most while leaving the rest of the body free from the pink liquid.

Padmé moved to the surgical decontamination area, and began scrubbing down, silently fuming at the ineptitude of her so-called colleague. If she hadn’t awoken when she had, Anakin might have died. She was quick, but thorough, in her scrub down and exited the decontamination just as Mik and Lana were moving Anakin from the surgery and to a small room down the hall.

She joined them, taking the opportunity to examine his left hand as she did. The scar was gone, the flesh healthy and pink. His fingers twitched in his unconscious state and she gently reached out to pull on them.

His hand closed around hers, sending a shiver down her spine. But she didn’t remove her hand. Instead she focused on the movements, testing his fingers, trying to ignore the feeling of protectiveness the instinctual response had wrought in her.

She had the strangest need to simply sit with him; to be there when he woke.

She pulled her hand away as they wheeled him into the room, gently transferring him to the bed, the bacta pump and seal being carefully arranged to the right side of the bed, what was left of his right arm immobilized so he couldn’t tear it off and risk further damage.

Padmé sent the nurses on their way and took the responsibility of hooking up his monitors herself. The reassuring steady beeping of the monitoring equipment quelled some of her fears, and she busied herself with little duties. Checking his pillow, tucking a light blanket around him, adjusting the temperature controls; checking the hand he still had for any other marks.

She spent the better part of an hour with Anakin, reluctant to leave his side. Eventually, duty reasserted itself over whim, and she closed the door to his room behind her. She had other patients to check on if Helkor's treatment of Anakin was any indication.

She went to find Mik and the information on her patients. First she needed to find out how many hours she'd slept and then she'd have a word or two with the inept Twi'lek Doctor. Her smile was grim, her step purposeful; it was a dressing down that was long over due.

"Lastly, you completely disregarded protocol when it comes to dealing with festering wounds." Padmé's tone was acid, biting. "Human patients require different levels of care than some other species, *Doctor*, something you're well aware of. I find it inconceivably reckless of you to have completely disregarded all the warning signs and let men die because of it!"

"We're at war, Doctor Naberrie." Helkor's tone was frosty, stiff. "Casualties are a part of war."

Padmé slammed her hands down on the top of the table between them. "Casualties happen on the battlefield, Helkor, not in my infirmary!" Her eyes glared daggers, for all her tone didn't change. "Get out. You're discharged; I'll find another of the Doctors to take over for me when my rotation is finished."

"You can't do that."

Padmé crossed her arms over her chest. "I am the authority on all things medical; it was part of my agreement when I signed up for this job. Get off my ship."

Helkor looked about to protest, so Padmé looked beyond him, her tone clipped. "Trooper. Doctor Helkor will be leaving presently. Please escort him to his transport. I don't want to see his face in my infirmary again."

"Yes, Doctor."

The trooper stepped in and Helkor knew he'd lost. He glared at Padmé. "I'll write the review board for this. I only tried to help."

"Then I suggest you attempt to help elsewhere next time, Doctor. Good day." She brushed past him. Ten of the critically ill that had been placed in Bacta several days before had died from toxic complications; four of them were Jedi. She'd slept through three days and lost precious time.

Her nursing staff had been talked to, given strict instructions to monitor and report any deviations from normal bacta readings. It was normally handled by the computer systems attached to the tanks, but for some reason the warnings hadn't been issued and the levels hadn't registered.

She'd shamefully used Helkor until their meeting minutes before, her rotation almost at an end. She'd assigned Mik to cover for her. As she'd proven herself to have good judgment, even put her objections to Helkor's methods in writing, she'd shown to be the most able of nurses. Padmé had come to trust Mik's judgment and knew she'd be awoken if something happened she'd be needed for.

Padmé was beginning to suspect that Helkor had sabotaged the critical bacta tanks, but she couldn't prove it. Why he'd try to harm patients, to kill Jedi, was beyond her. Hopefully, with him out of the way, the nonsense would stop.

Padmé briefed Mik on a six hour rotation schedule, as well as the information that would be needed for the current patients. Leaving instructions to be woken if anything major should happen; Padmé sent a brief message to the Jedi regarding their brethren and their demise. She also added a note that Anakin had been removed from the Bacta, and placed in a separate unit. She added her regrets that his right arm had needed to be removed, but he had maintained the left. Her surgery had been 50% successful.

She shut off the terminal, rubbing the back of her neck with one hand before pushing to her feet. She needed to check on him, just to be sure.

"Doctor Naberrie."

She jumped as she turned towards her door, her hand flying up to cover her rapidly palpitating heart. "Master Kenobi, oh goodness, you scared me!"

"I apologize." Obi-Wan's face was drawn, but he inclined his head in apology. "How is Anakin?"

"I just sent an update to Master Yoda and Master Windu." Padmé sighed. "I think you had best see for yourself." She moved beyond him and motioned for him to follow.

Obi-Wan fell into step beside her. "He's out of the bacta?"

She nodded. "Yes. But I'm afraid they had to take his right arm, Master Kenobi—"

"Obi-Wan." He corrected her with a faint smile. "My friends call me Obi-Wan."

"Obi-Wan." She managed a return smile, hiding behind professionalism. "I've tested his left hand and found it seems to be working properly, though Anakin still hasn't regained consciousness. That alone is worrisome. His accident was more than a week ago."

"He's always been stubborn. Is there a chance he can be fitted with a robotic replacement?"

"Of course. Though, if he doesn't regain consciousness it won't do him much good." She paused outside Anakin's room and hit the door switch.

The lighting was dim, but she could read Obi-Wan's shocked expression as he took in Anakin's condition.

Padmé spoke before he asked the obvious. "We had some other complications. I believe a colleague of mine was attempting to kill the Jedi in the bacta tanks. I managed to get to Anakin before the effects became permanent, or lethal, but four other Jedi weren't so lucky."

Obi-Wan moved to Anakin's side, looking down into his sleeping face. In slumber he looked boyish, though his color was pale, his dark lashes standing out vividly against his white cheeks. "Will he recover?"

"Presumably." Padmé could see the concern in Obi-Wan's posture. "Providing he awakes soon."

"Can't you make him wake up?"

Padmé shook her head. "We've tried a stimulant; unfortunately, his mind doesn't appear to want to wake up."

"Have you tried speaking with him? Asking him nicely?"

"That doesn't normally work. I believe Mik was pleading with him earlier, trying to tease him into wakefulness."

"I meant, have *you* asked him."

She arched her eyebrows at him. "Me? Why don't you try it?"

Obi-Wan looked up at her. "Because I haven't haunted his dreams for ten years." He sighed, shaking his head at her look of surprise. 'His crush on you never faded, Padmé. He spoke of you often, and while we — I — tried to discourage it, he didn't seem to notice. Attachment is forbidden to a Jedi.' His gaze traveled back to his apprentice. "Anakin's no normal Jedi."

"But attachment is still forbidden."

Obi-Wan nodded. "That doesn't mean I'm not above using his... fixation on you to my advantage if it will bring him out of this."

Padmé shifted uncomfortably, wondering if Obi-Wan could sense her own morbid fixation on his apprentice. She hoped not. "He's far too young for me." *Liar; five years between adults is nothing.* She buried the thought, banishing it to the recesses of her mind.

Obi-Wan laughed, but there was little mirth in the sound. "I wasn't implying you should start a relationship with him Padmé. I was simply asking if you would indulge his boyish fantasy in the hopes of waking him up."

"This isn't like the story of the sleeping beauty that needed to be woken with a kiss, is it?"

"I hope not." Obi-Wan moved back to the door. "I'll wait outside so you won't be inhibited by my presence."

Padmé opened her mouth to protest that she hadn't agreed to anything, but he was already gone, the door closing in her face. Inhibited by his presence indeed, she wasn't going to talk to an unconscious man, no matter how good looking! Besides, it wasn't as if he needed to be in the room to know what was happening. Not that anything was going to happen. She pushed the thought away and moved to the edge of the bed. She'd said she would try to help, and so she would.

She regarded Anakin carefully, examining him as if really seeing him for the first time. Not as a patient, but as a woman. He was strongly built, muscular, but not overly so, and lean,

his power hidden by a pretty boy visage. His hair fell over his forehead, and her fingers itched to brush it back, even as she bent near him, inhaling the healthy scent of him, she knew she'd do as Obi-Wan asked. She was going to talk to him in the small hope that those icy blue eyes she'd met across the battle field on Geonosis would open and look at her again.

A little part of her brain was asking if she'd lost her mind.

She ignored it, taking Anakin's hand in hers and gently squeezing his fingers, a lump in her throat. "Anakin. It's Padmé. I need you to wake up for me."

She rubbed the back of his hand, feeling his fingers twitch, but his eyelids didn't even flutter. *Not nice enough?* she wondered silently. *Or was it simply not what he wanted to hear?*

She swallowed hard, darting a look at the door before moving closer and giving into temptation. She gently brushed Anakin's bangs off his face, unaware that her own expression had softened. "Anakin, it's Padmé. Do you remember me?" She searched his face for some kind of indication, and she saw his cheek twitch. She took it as a sign he could hear her and continued. 'I met you when you were just a boy on Tatooine. A boy of nine who flew a pod racer to help get us off the planet. I remember thinking you were very brave for your age.' She smiled softly, remembering. "You were very outspoken, confident; you called me an angel. Do you remember?"

His eyelids twitched, and her voice softened as she leaned closer, barely whispering to him now, her lips almost touching his ear. "I'm no angel, Anakin. I distracted you in a battle where you could have lost your life and cost you your right arm. I was able to give you back the left, but you'll have to learn to use a metal hand. I'm sorry I couldn't right my mistake. I'm sorry you have to pay for it."

She pulled back, unable to banish the sheen of tears that clouded her gaze as she watched him. He deserved to be whole, the powerful young man she'd seen in the arena and she'd been unable to give that back to him.

His eyelids fluttered again and slowly opened. They were the color of clear Nabooian skies, and they caught her immediately, capturing her as surely as if he'd caught her in his arms. She didn't move, barely inches away from his face, searching his gaze.

His tongue darted out, licking dry, parched lips. "Still... an... angel." He told her in a voice that cracked. "My... angel."

Those soft words sent her world spinning, careening off balance. They had an effect she couldn't shake, couldn't have expected. She felt as if someone had reached inside her chest and grabbed her heart; squeezing it, so tight did it feel. Her tears burned the back of her eye lids threatening to fall as she blinked them away, and she said the only thing that came to mind. "You're awake."

"Water... Please..."

She moved away quickly, entering the 'fresher to pour him a glass, her hands shaking as she waited for it to fill. She took a deep breath, steadying her suddenly racing heart, and mentally commanding her hands to stop shaking. They did, but with difficulty. She closed her eyes, taking another deep breath, trying to find balance. *He's just another patient*, she told

herself firmly. *A patient with blue eyes the color of the afternoon sky.* She pushed the thought away and twisting the tap shut with a vicious turn and moving back into the room.

Anakin was watching her, and her stomach flipped unexpectedly. Those blue eyes, those blue, icy eyes were watching her, missing nothing. She smiled for him, coming back to his side and held the glass to his lips. “Slow sips. You’ve been unconscious for almost two weeks. We don’t want to upset your stomach.”

He didn’t reply as he followed her instructions.

“I see it worked.”

Padmé jumped this time as Obi-Wan’s voice surprised her, so intent was she on having Anakin drink properly. She spilled water on his chest and blushed, putting the glass on the stand as she grabbed for nearby towels to mop up the mess. “Oh, I’m sorry.”

“S’alright.” Anakin’s voice was hoarse as he looked beyond her to Obi-Wan. “Master.”

Obi-Wan held up his hand. “Don’t speak, Anakin.” He watched as Padmé mopped up the water on Anakin’s bare chest, her eyes on her work, her cheeks slightly flushed. He didn’t comment. “The council has reported that Dooku has been killed. The last week has shown that the separatists have little stomach for war without him.”

Padmé looked up from her job, tossing the towel into a nearby hamper. “So soon?”

Obi-Wan nodded. “The clones are resilient fighters it would seem, and well equipped. The only problem we’re facing is that the Trade Federation controls a good deal of territory and they’re using it to their advantage. I’m afraid this war may be a long one; the people may not have the will to fight, but their droids don’t suffer that weakness.”

“Then there will be more casualties.”

“I’m afraid so, Doctor.” Obi-Wan looked back to Anakin. “The council has asked me to bring you once you’re healed, Anakin. I trust you won’t take up too much of Doctor Naberrie’s time with your recovery.”

Anakin winced, nodding stiffly. “No more... than needed... Master.”

“Hold on one second.” Padmé glared at Obi-Wan. “Anakin is in need of time to rest and heal, Master Kenobi. He can’t do that gallivanting around the fleet and the galaxy with you. I will release him when he’s ready, but he’s not even awake for ten minutes and you’re already issuing orders. Well here’s some for *you*. Anakin will remain under my care, and the care of my staff, until such a time as I deem him ready for active duty.”

“Every Jedi is needed, Doctor.”

Padmé slammed her hands down on her hips. “Every *able bodied* Jedi is needed, General.” She looked at him pointedly, her ire obvious. “Anakin is not even out of his sick bed. We will need to fit him with a new arm; if he wants one. He’ll need to regain the proper use of both. His recovery from infirm to able bodied won’t be easy nor short. Out! I won’t have you upsetting my patient!”

Obi-Wan opened his mouth to protest, but Padmé advanced on him. “I said out, General! Don’t make me have the council issue you a direct order. Out, out!”

Obi-Wan cast a helpless glance back at Anakin and he couldn't help but see the sparkle of amusement in his Padawan's tired gaze. He stopped outside the doors. "I'm out. Any other orders?"

Padmé closed the door behind her to speak with him privately. "Obi-Wan, I want you to understand something."

"Oh?"

"You're not a Doctor. You're not even a qualified Nurse. If you want Anakin to get better, and quickly, don't make promises you can't keep. He may never use either hand again, *if* he chooses to get a substitute. For him to be able bodied, he needs to rest and recover. You did your job; let me do mine."

"Of course, Doctor." He placed a hand on her shoulder, squeezing none-too gently. "Just don't let those baby blues fool you. He's still a Jedi, soon to be knighted. Complications like you are ones he doesn't need."

She opened her mouth to protest but he'd already turned on his heel and left. "Men!" She shook her head and stepped back into Anakin's room. His eyes were closed, his breathing even and deep.

She smiled as she watched him, going to sit in the chair by his bed and slipping her hand into his. As she watched him sleep, her own eyelids drooped and she placed her head on the mattress next to his hand. She'd just close her eyes for a few moments...

Chapter 6

Chapter 6

A hand gently stroked her hair. Slowly, deliberately, smoothing the strands away from her face. She sighed, feeling contentment in the movement, the affection and caring in the gesture unmistakable. Her brow knotted. Hand stroking her hair? Her eyes flew open and her head snapped up, the hand dropping from her head to the mattress. A very masculine hand.

Anakin Skywalker was watching her.

Padmé fought, and managed, to keep the blush off her face. “Anak—”

“So beautiful.” He cut her off, his response barely audible as he looked at her.

She blushed this time at the heat in his gaze. “How are you feeling?” She strove for her professionalism. He was a patient. She didn’t think this way about patients.

He continued to watch her, his eyes hooded. “I’m hungry.”

“And so you should be.” She refused to acknowledge the double meaning in the statement, confirmed by the heat in his gaze. Heat that shouldn’t be there. Heat she didn’t want to see. *Liar*. She moved away from him, gaining perspective with distance. “You seem to be feeling better.”

He nodded. “Thanks to you I’m able to feel better.”

She wondered if he knew just how true that statement was as she turned back to him, checking his color. It was good, the grayness completely gone. His complexion was still a little off, but she judged it would return after he’d eaten something. Food had an amazing restorative power. At least he was sounding more confident; more healthy. After his ordeal the last week and some odd, she was glad he was out of the worst of it. She nodded to his hand. “How’s the hand feel?”

“Fine.” He lifted it for her to see and flexed his fingers, rotating his wrist. “You do nice work.”

She dropped her gaze, unintentionally looking at his right arm, and then away. “Sometimes.”

“Always.” His voice held conviction. “You’re not the one who took my arm.”

“No, but I should have been.” She braced herself for censure with her admission, looking back at him. “If I hadn’t collapsed, I might have been able to save both of your arms. As it was, a bad decision by a colleague of mine made that impossible. I’m sorry, Anakin.”

He closed his eyes, flexing the fingers of his left hand before turning his gaze to stare at the ceiling. “I heard you talking to Obi-Wan. About a replacement for my arm.”

“It’s possible, yes.” She couldn’t read his emotions with his gaze turned away. “I have a top notch crew for replacement limbs.”

"I want to build my own." His gaze came back to hers. "Will you help me?"

She blinked. "Build your own?" She was unable to stop herself from echoing him. She knew he'd been good with mechanics, but build his own replacement? "You haven't even been awake for..." She glanced at the chrono, "twelve hours and you want to build your own arm?" She shook her head, incredulous.

He nodded, not looking at her.

"You're in no condition to build anything right now."

"That doesn't change the fact that I want to build my own arm. I'm the one who's going to have to live with it, I'd like to know that it's not going to fail me when I need it most."

"I'll make a deal with you then."

"What kind of deal?"

"I'll help you build it once you're able to stomach solid food."

"Padmé—"

"Not a minute sooner, Skywalker."

"This wasn't how I pictured meeting you again."

She blinked. "Pardon?"

"You're supposed to be a senator."

She chuckled softly, her eyebrows arching amused. "Says who?"

"The Force. I saw you in a vision when I was a boy." He regarded her calmly. "But you're not. Instead you're a Doctor, *my Doctor*, bound by a code of ethics that's as binding and constricting as the Jedi's."

Was it her imagination or did he sound incredibly frustrated by the whole situation. She forced another chuckle, determined to keep things light. "We both chose our paths with open eyes, Anakin. I didn't end up here by accident."

"I did." He looked sadly down at his stump of an arm.

"Anakin, I—"

"Don't say it." His gaze snapped back to hers, flashing dangerously. "Don't say you're sorry, Padmé. You're not the one who held the lightsaber."

"I..." She stopped. "I'll get your breakfast." She fled, knowing as she did that she was fleeing. It was a retreat, an escape from the emotions boiling and simmering through those blue eyes. Away from the intensity and the confusion. Away from the pain.

Mik encountered her in the hallway, and Padmé quickly directed her to Anakin's room with the instruction to bring soup and water. He wasn't to try solid foods until he was able to keep liquids down. She knew from experience it would be several days before that happened, which gave her breathing space and room to think.

Once Mik had her orders, Padmé began her rounds — though she was a couple hours early — taking solace in the routine. She hid behind the mask of ever proper Doctor, caring for each individual who came her way, for each clone that needed stitches or a bacta patch. Caring for them so she wouldn't have to examine the depth of her caring for another patient.

Yet Anakin's eyes haunted her through her rotation, and she couldn't shake the feeling that something was happening, something she didn't understand. Something that wasn't capable of being controlled. For someone who had been in control of her whole life, the revelation was frightening.

Padmé stayed away from Anakin, immersing herself in the care of the troopers and Jedi who came to her for help. She tried to gain balance and perspective with distance. She tried to lose herself in the reports of her patients. Nothing worked. Those blue eyes haunted her. They taunted her. They demanded to be acknowledged.

But it was something she couldn't do.

With Anakin now on the road to recovery, she assigned his care directly to Mik, giving detailed instructions as to how to work the muscles of his left arm, as well as how to fit him for a new arm if he wanted one for his right.

It wasn't a surprise when, two weeks later, Padmé learned Anakin had been knighted by Mace and Yoda, and he sent for her. In good conscience she couldn't refuse and she didn't even try to. Instead, she cloaked herself in the trappings of her job and was determined to remain objective. She was technically his Doctor; if he needed something that was in her power to give, she would do everything she could to oblige him. The little voice in the back of her brain taunted her. She'd lost her objectivity the first moment she'd seen those baby blues open to meet hers in the recovery room.

She was simply too stubborn to acknowledge it.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7

“Get out!”

Padmé broke into a run at the end of the corridor as the enraged order echoed down the hallway. Two of her assistant nurses, civilians really, spilled out of Anakin’s room, falling over themselves in their haste to escape his wrath. They darted a quick look at her before scurrying away without a word.

Padmé stepped into the entrance way and blinked. The table normally leveled across the patient’s lap for meals had been snapped off at the base and lay in one corner, the food that had been on it splattered across the wall. The bed was moved, on its side, and empty, the sheets haphazardly scattered across the floor. The room was a mess.

“I thought I told you to get out.”

She turned towards his cold voice, and crossed her arms over her chest, tapping her foot impatiently. His back was to her, his body hunched over something in the corner. She idly noted his hair was slightly longer, the Padawan braid missing from his nape. It didn’t, however, stop her sharp words. “I seem to recall receiving a request to come and see you. If you’re going to act like a baby, Skywalker, I can always have Lana deal with you. She specializes in neo-natal behaviors.”

“Padmé!” He spun from his position in the corner, pleasure lighting his face before annoyance sparked in his eyes. “You’ve been avoiding me.” His complaint was petulant, like a child long denied a favorite treat.

“And I’ll continue avoiding you if you’re going to act like a spoiled brat.” She stalked towards him, displeasure radiating from every line of her body. “On your feet.”

She regretted the command almost instantly when he followed it.

He was tall, at least a head and shoulders taller than she was, and it forced her to glare *up* at him. It didn’t help he was wearing nothing beyond the sleep shorts her make-shift hospital had provided him with. She fought to keep her eyes on his face; he was too easy on the eyes by half. She looked pointedly from him to the bed. “Do you enjoy sleeping on the floor, Skywalker?”

“Anakin.” His voice cracked. “Please call me Anakin.”

“When you’ve earned it, maybe.”

“With what?”

“Good behavior.” She cocked her head at him. “You can start by cleaning up your mess.”

He blanched. “I can’t. I don’t...” He looked helplessly at the stump of his right arm.”

“You were well enough to cause the destruction, you’re well enough to fix it.”

“But—”

She poked him in the chest, her eyes blazing. “No buts — unless its yours getting over to that disaster and putting it back in order!”

He took a half a step back and she was peevishly pleased. He deserved to be afraid of her. She could see his throat working, the anger and hurt in his gaze, but he turned and slowly walked across the room, putting his left hand out as he reached the overturned bed. It righted itself slowly as she watched. She shifted her gaze back to Anakin. His eyes were closed; sweat having broken out on his forehead and his chest glistened under the harsh glare of the room’s lamps. The muscles in his back worked as his hand moved, tempting her.

She squashed the urge to touch him by folding her hand together in front of her.

Anakin finished putting the bed back in place and then collected the blankets, then the tray and the bowls. He placed them on the bed one at a time. He turned to look at her and she simply looked at the mess on the wall behind him. He made a face, and then disappeared into the small ‘fresher. He came out a moment later with a cloth and quickly wiped the mess from the walls.

“That’s enough.” She stopped him as he made to bend down and clean the floor, her trained eye having caught the paling of his skin under his tan. She stepped back into the hall to retrieve the cart the assistants had left and moved it to beside the bed. She moved the bowls and utensils onto the cart and then motioned for him to get back onto the bed, the tray in her hands.

Anakin left the rag on the floor and settled back onto the bed, still looking rebellious.

Padmé arched an eyebrow at him and he made a face at her, swinging his legs back onto the bed and settling in as she placed the tray on his lap. “Much better.”

“Do I get a reward?”

“For what, doing what you should have in the first place?”

He sighed. “I don’t like being confined here.”

“I don’t blame you.” She righted the stool that had been by the bed and took a seat, putting them almost at eye level. “Now, you said you wanted to talk to me. What about?”

“You said you’d help me build a replacement once I could stomach solid food.”

“Can you?”

“I haven’t been allowed to try.” His gaze narrowed on her. “Were those your orders?”

She simply looked back at him.

“Sorry.” He mumbled the apology. “Can I try to eat something real?”

Padmé pulled the cart to her and opened the bottom shelf, pulling out the sandwiches she’d specifically given instruction for him to try today. “Will these do?”

His eyes lit up and he reached for them. Padmé placed it on the tray on his lap, then pulled a water bottle from the cart and added it to his tray. He tore into the sandwich like a starving

man long denied food and she chuckled softly. She took the opportunity to move about him, pleased to see that he hadn't ripped any monitors out during his tantrum. It appeared as if one of her staff had removed the IVs, the cap on his arm, and the monitors, for they were neatly put away on the wall, untouched by his anger. That was something. She moved around him, checking the dressing on his right arm. The bandage was clean, the stump nicely healed. He was ready to be fitted with a prosthetic.

"What's the verdict, Doctor?"

Her gaze snapped up to find him watching her, brown colliding with blue. She smiled slightly. "You heal nicer than some patients I've seen. How's the left?"

"Good as new." He flexed the fingers for her, making a fist and then extending his fingers. "A bit of a twinge, but it's slowly fading."

"Phantom pains." She nodded knowingly. "Sometimes it's a side effect. They should disappear within the month."

"Did you bring more than just a sandwich?" He looked longingly at the cart. "I'm awful hungry."

She moved back around to the cart. "I've more, but you need to let that one settle. Your stomach has been on liquids for awhile now."

The object of their discussion chose at that moment to emit a loud, almost angry, growl. Anakin's eyes widened comically and Padmé slapped her hand over her mouth to prevent an unprofessional giggle, her eyes dancing. The look on his face was priceless.

He awkwardly patted his stomach. "There, there little guy. The nice Doctor didn't mean it. She really does mean to feed you." He cast a pleading look at her.

Padmé relented, pulling another sandwich from the cart and placing it in front of him. "Don't blame me if you get a tummy ache."

"Oh, I won't." He promised solemnly, mirth making his blue eyes dance. "I could never blame you for anything."

Her amusement fled, replaced quickly and suddenly by the almost overwhelming feeling of guilt. Her smile died and she turned her gaze to his hand where it grasped the sandwich eagerly. She reached out to trace the invisible line where the arm had been severed and pulled her hand back before making contact.

"Padmé?"

She took a deep breath, bracing herself as she lifted her gaze to meet his again. "I know I didn't wield the lightsaber, Anakin, but I did distract you at a crucial point in your duel with Dooku. I wanted you to know I'm sorry."

"You've nothing to apologize for."

She pushed to her feet. "I have to do my rounds of the other patients. I'll be back in an hour. If you've managed to keep both of those down, we'll talk about your new arm."

"Padmé—"

“Don’t, Anakin.” She shook her head, stepping away from the bed as his hand reached out to her, as if to reassure her. That was supposed to be her job. “I said I’d be back. Don’t push.”

“But, I...” He looked at her almost helplessly. “It’s not your fault!”

Her answering smile was faint, mirthless. “Then perhaps I need to realize that for myself. Enjoy your dinner. There’s more where that came from if it settles well.”

He didn’t have the chance to respond as she strode from the room, taking the cart with her. She needed to regain her equilibrium; her objectivity. She needed to understand why, of all her patients, of all the *men* she knew, Anakin Skywalker was affecting her this way. It was more than guilt, it was more than professional interest. And it was more than a little disturbing. She’d escape for an hour and then try to deal with him on her terms.

It was something that was proving more and more difficult each time she went back.

“I didn’t think you’d come back.”

“I always keep my promises, especially to my patients.” She stepped into his room, consulting his chart before smiling. “Did the sandwiches agree with you?”

He nodded. “You said there were more?”

Padmé pressed the call button on the wall by the door. “This is Doctor Naberrie. Jedi Skywalker is ready for his dinner now.”

“We’ll be right down, Doctor.”

Padmé turned back to him. “Satisfied?”

“Will you join me for dinner?”

“I already ate.”

“Liar.” He pointed at her accusingly. “You really shouldn’t lie, Padmé, you’re not very good at it.”

She blushed, unable to stop herself. “I don’t eat with my patients, Anakin.”

“That’s why you’re here at the end of your rotation?” He grinned at her smugly. “I know you’re done in less than five minutes; the nurses love to talk about you, you know. You’re something of a hero to them.”

“I’m just doing my job.” She was going to strangle her staff collectively. “Besides, we can’t very well work on your design for a new arm when I’m on duty. I could be called away for surgery.”

“Than join me for dinner.” He entreated, his blue eyes searching hers from across the room. “It’s the least I can do when you’re giving up sleep for me.”

She felt trapped by his gaze, mesmerized, and found herself agreeing before she could stop herself. “Just this once. I don’t intend to make this a habit.”

His innocent smile didn’t fool her. “A habit? Where would you get that idea?”

She didn't answer as she crossed the room to join him, taking her seat on the stool next to his bed again. "You Jedi have a habit of being manipulative, Anakin. Don't think you can manipulate me."

"I wouldn't dream of it." He pulled a datapad from under the sheets. "I've been working on the design for the last week since they took me off the monitors. Take a look."

She accepted the proffered pad, scanning the crude diagram he'd drawn, checking the specifics he wanted, and her eyes widened in surprise. "This is far more ambitious than your protocol droid." She didn't see the flash of pain in his eyes as she continued to scan through the datapad. If she had, it might have prepared her for his next comment.

"3PO was sold to pay off Watto's gambling debts. Last I heard he had been bought by a scrap company and melted down; after they used him as a prototype for a new model."

Her head came up in surprise. "I'm sorry to hear that, Anakin. I know you spent a good deal of time working on him; he meant a lot to you."

"Not more than my mother."

"How is she?"

"Alive and well." He smiled faintly. 'She sent me a message saying she'd been sold, and then freed, by some moisture farmer on Tatooine. She says she's happy and that he married her, so I guess I can't really complain. The Council didn't want me to have the message, but Obi-Wan knew I'd been having these really horrible nightmares about her, so they relented. After I read her message, the nightmares stopped.' He sighed. "I miss her."

Padmé slid her hand over his, gently squeezing his fingers. "I miss my family too."

He squeezed her fingers back. "So what do you think of my design?"

She looked back to the datapad. "I think it's a little more advanced than my team is used to." She admitted. "Some of these servos and motors seem unnecessary, but then, I don't think they've ever done a replacement for a Jedi before."

"Would they give me access to their lab so I can build it?"

"I'll do better than that." She slid the datapad back onto his lap. 'I'll have them bring you the parts. There's nothing special in there that requires lab access, so they can continue working on their projects without having you underfoot.' She met his gaze frankly. "And as strong as you feel, you're not ready for combat or long periods of activity just yet. Your body has suffered quite a shock, so it'll take time to recover."

"How much time?"

"A month, at least."

"So I'm half-way there." He blew out a frustrated breath. "Building my new arm won't interfere with my recovery, will it?"

"It shouldn't." She patted his hand, gently extracting the one he still had captured, trying not to notice how their fingers seemed to have twined together of their own accord. "In fact, it's good practice to see how much fine control you have with your left hand."

“You’re not going to help me?”

She chuckled softly. “It’s not really my area of specialty, Anakin, but since you’re building your own, I’ll come by every night after shift and help you with the parts that need two hands, alright?”

“More than alright.”

A knock sounded at the door. “Come.” Padmé smiled as the serving droid entered, pushing a covered cart. She stood, going to retrieve the trays, wondering who in the kitchen had been thoughtful enough to send the second one, and then dismissed the droid.

Anakin’s eyes glittered as she slid the tray onto his lap before retaking her seat. She pulled the lid off his and then hers, inhaling a rich, meaty aroma. “Nerf steaks.” She swore she saw his mouth watering.

Anakin picked up his fork and hesitated, slowly lowering the utensil, the light leaving his eyes as he swallowed hard. “I... can’t cut this.”

Padmé checked her own plate and then switched their meals, giving him the pre-cut tray. “My fault. I had the chef dice yours so you wouldn’t have to.”

“Thanks.” He picked up his fork again and dug in, though his actions lacked some of their previous enthusiasm.

Padmé was more delicate, more refined as she balanced her tray on her knees and slowly cut off pieces. She was hungry, but watching Anakin eat was far more satisfying for some reason. Heck, watching him doing anything, even just sleeping, was satisfying. It caused a nervous bubble to settle in her stomach, killing her appetite for food.

Anakin looked up at her questioningly as he swallowed. “Isn’t it good?” He nodded to her plate.

“I’m not really hungry.” She admitted.

“Oh.” He shrugged, looking at her curiously, before going back to his meal.

Padmé began asking him questions to slow his rate of consumption, forcing him to chew and swallow before answering. She fell into a professional pattern, checking and double checking his answers, ensuring he didn’t eat so fast he’d make himself sick. For all the routine, the nervous bubble stayed. It stayed once their discussion was finished. It stayed as he finished her steak too, and it stayed as she left his room with the promise to return the following evening, if she could, and send the parts so he could begin his work.

The bubble even stayed as she changed from her scrubs and coat into her night gown and crawled into bed. As she laid her head on the pillow, knowing she had a shift to begin in less than six hours, the bubble refused to go away. Unwilling to examine it closer, she closed her eyes resolutely. She wasn’t going to let something like tension keep her from sleep. Her patients, the troopers and the Jedi might need her well-rested expertise and she was determined to give it to them.

She wasn’t surprised when she woke the following morning to find the bubble hadn’t left.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8

The strain around Larissa's mouth was Padmé's first clue something was wrong. The younger woman had just been reinserted into the rotation after a two week stint on the front lines. The battles had been hard if the number of wounded were any indication, and the medics were being slowly rotated out as more clone medics became available. She had need of those who weren't clones' talents in their areas of specialty; something which Padmé had insisted upon — once she'd realized how competent the clone medics were.

Larissa's gaze was steady, but her hands shook as she handed Padmé the reports for the previous shift.

"Larissa, are you alright?"

"Yes, Doctor." Her eyes shifted, almost as if she wasn't sure of what she was seeing. "I just need to get some sleep."

Padmé eyed her critically, hearing the crack in her voice that Larissa tried to hide. She disregarded Larissa's protest, and grabbed the younger woman by the arm, tugging her into one of the examination cubicles. "You're not alright. Sit."

"I have duties—"

Padmé pinned her with a look and Larissa snapped her mouth shut. Padmé carefully examined Larissa's eyes, shining a light into the dilated pupils and recognizing the first stages of hysteria in her reactions. Two more quick tests and Padmé was convinced Larissa was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Her reactions were twitchy, random, as if she was seeing something that wasn't there.

"Larissa."

"Yes, Doctor?"

"How much time are you spending with the clones?"

Larissa flinched, her hands trembling so violently the younger woman folded them in her lap, and Padmé knew she had the cause of the problem.

Padmé didn't wait for a response. "You're relieved of duty, young woman."

"But, Doctor-!"

Padmé held her hand up. "You're exhibiting all the classic signs of someone on the verge of a break down. You need rest and relaxation. You need to be away from that face."

"It haunts my dreams." Larissa's admission was shaky. "That same face. It's everywhere. The dead, the walking wounded, the healthy... they're all the same. Countless copies..." her voice trailed off and she shuddered, her eyes glazing.

Padmé took one of the tranquilizers from the stocked shelves and quickly administered it to prevent Larissa from shaking off the table. “Enough. You’re restricted to quarters with instructions to sleep and relax. You’re not to watch anything with relation to the clones or the war; am I clear?”

“Yes, Doctor.”

“Good, because if you want to come back to work, you’ll do so for two weeks.”

“Two weeks!”

“Two weeks.” Padmé’s voice was firm. “I hate to lose you, Larissa, you’ve proven to be invaluable, especially on the ground and in triage, but I either lose you now for a short period of time, or I lose you later for who knows how long. I can’t afford to have your experience out for an extended period of time.”

“I don’t need two weeks, Doctor Naberrie, I promise, I’m just a little tired.”

“You’re over worked and starting to feel the psychological effects of dealing with the same face every day. No.” Padmé refused to budge. “I’m changing the rotations beginning today. One rotation with the clones for every two with the other casualties. Thankfully, the clones come equipped with their own medics and they’re taking over the battlefield portion of our job; I can minimize the exposure of the rest of the staff to avoid them ending up in your position.”

“Then I can—”

“Two weeks. No sooner.” Padmé patted Larissa on the shoulder and then turned to go. “I’ll expect you to be fully rested and ready to tackle the new wave of patients.”

“Yes, Doctor.” Larissa slid from the table and slipped out of the bay. She didn’t dare disobey Padmé, and Padmé found herself severely missing Cordé. Someone had needed to stay behind to finish nursing their patients, and Cordé had been the logical choice. Logic or not, Padmé could have used her friend’s solid presence right now.

She pushed the thought away, and checked the list of patients and their current status on the datapad.

Every day it was dwindling as more of them were moved from Bacta to beds, and beds out of the medical ward to their own quarters. The list was still long — over thirty — including several Jedi. The clones she had under her care were all similarly injured, making their treatment almost uniform across the board. Thankfully, she only had to check their condition once a rotation before escaping.

She shivered thinking about their identical smiles; the identical gratitude. No wonder Larissa was starting to fall apart.

Her routine was now well established. Early mornings, as she began rotation, she started in the clones wing. She spoke with each of their medics, stamping down resolutely on the creepy feelings they provoked. Then she toured the bacta tanks, ensuring those ready to come out were properly tended, double checking fluid levels and finally, seeing that new patients who needed it were inserted.

The last part of her routine involved checking in on the Jedi under her care.

But, before she made for the wing housing the Jedi, she stopped to upload a new duty roster. Any medic who had been serving on the front line was being removed from rotation. Padmé, as senior staff, worked a ten to twelve hour shift, sometimes longer, and frequently saw the different rotations. The field staff were needed, but not so much that their own health had to be sacrificed. With the dwindling work load, and only the occasional new Jedi patient, Padmé's crew were caught up and holding their own. The new medics would give them breathing room, but only once they were ready for duty.

Padmé's tour of the Jedi wing included making detailed notes about every Jedi and their estimated recovery date. Two of them, like Anakin, would be with her for at least another couple of weeks. The rest were likely to be discharged before the end of the week. Thankfully, Jedi healed quickly when given the right treatment combined with healing trances.

Padmé's loose schedule left her time to visit the lab and speak with the head technician about acquiring parts for Anakin to work on his limb. The head tech, a dour looking Verpine, was reluctant to part with any equipment until Padmé produced Anakin's sketch.

The Verpine examined the schematic making noises she couldn't interpret before she'd been grudgingly informed that the parts would be sent to Skywalker's quarters before the end of her rotation. She thanked him before resuming her rounds.

Through the day, Padmé fielded objections and questions from the medics that had been stationed on the front lines. She interviewed each on personally and found all of them, to some degree or another, suffering from similar symptoms that Larissa had. They received the same instruction. Every Medic who reported from field duty was to be given two weeks immediate leave. They were to avoid any and all reports on the war and clone troopers in particular.

They grumbled, some pleaded, but in the end Padmé's orders stood and they had no choice but to comply. She finished her day with the examination of any new patients in bacta and a final report sent to fleet command as well as an update on the Jedi to the council. Yet, through it all, that bubble in her stomach never left. It was suppressed and ignored so she could complete her job.

Finally, with ten minutes to the end of shift, she passed the information for the evening care on to the graveyard shift nurses and headed for Anakin's quarters. If anyone noticed just how much time she was spending with him, no one said anything. Padmé only hoped it was because they took her interest to be professional in nature.

Sadly, as she stood outside Anakin's door, she knew that was no longer the case. She only hoped she'd escape from this situation with her heart intact because she had a sneaky suspicion that, and maybe more, was on the line.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9

"I was wondering when you'd show up."

She couldn't help but smile at his grumpy demeanor. "Good evening to you too, Anakin."

He smiled sheepishly. "Sorry. I'm a really lousy patient, aren't I?"

"I don't know." She came forward, noting several trays of tools and parts littering the area around his bed. Some considerate soul had kept them on trays high and near enough for him to reach without moving too much. She navigated them to reach her stool, and slid onto it. "Obi-Wan complained when I tended him too. I think it's a Jedi thing."

"And the other Jedi?"

She shrugged. "The Jedi healers put them into healing trances. They don't say much. How's it coming?" She nodded to the pile of parts in his lap.

"Slowly." He grimaced. "I think I finally understand what you meant when you said I'd have to strengthen the fingers again."

"I can't imagine its easy trying to build something with your off hand either. I seem to remember the hydrospanners being in your right hand when you were tinkering with your pod."

"Really?" He looked up surprise, the pleasure in his voice making her blush prettily.

"Really. I just didn't realize it until now."

"Oh?" He turned his gaze back to the components in his lap, using his knees to hold them as he awkwardly put another bolt in place, holding it through the Force before tightening it with the hydrospanner.

Padmé was glad he'd averted his piercing gaze; he saw far too much. "To be honest Anakin, I haven't thought much about my time with you until recently."

"That's funny." He added another bolt and another component, tightening the joints. 'I never stopped thinking about you.' He glanced up at her, gauging her reaction before continuing. "Obi-Wan used to tease me about you; I think he was hoping I'd forget about you eventually."

She chuckled softly, reaching out to help him put one of the larger pieces in place, their hands brushing. "I never said I forgot you, Anakin. Here, hold that." She reached for another hydrospanner, a larger one, and began the first rotations on the bolt as he held the part in place. "I just didn't think about our encounter much."

"You were too busy thinking about Qui-Gon and helping other people."

Her head snapped up, meeting his gaze surprised. “How did you... Are you reading my mind?”

He grinned boyishly. “I guessed. You always did like helping people. Qui-Gon’s death wasn’t your fault.”

She blew a strand of her hair out of her eyes. “Everyone keeps telling me that, and you know what? *I know* there wasn’t anything I could have done. At least, I know that now. When I left politics all I could see was Qui-Gon’s face, his injuries.” She shivered, pulling her hands away so he could turn his creation another way in his lap. “Back then all I could think about was what if Obi-Wan, or another Jedi, ended up injured like that again? What if they lost a limb to a lightsaber, what were their options? I was appalled to see the unintentional amputation was their only recourse. So... I decided to change it.”

“And you have.” He twisted his left arm, smiling crookedly. “Were injuries like mine what you had in mind when you were studying?”

She blushed again. “Double amputations, especially by lightsabers, are usually limited to fingers. Though, you may think less of me when I say, you’re right. Something as serious as your injury is why I started this specialty.” She sighed, her gaze going to the arm she hadn’t been able to save. “I guess I’m still learning.”

His hand slid over hers, warm and reassuring in its grip. “You tried. From what I’ve heard from Mik, it wasn’t your fault anyway. She said something about another doctor sabotaging the recoveries of the bacta patients.”

“Mik talks too much.”

“But it’s true, right?”

She nodded reluctantly. “To my shame, yes. I was so worried about your injuries I couldn’t sleep. I... collapsed on the fifth or sixth day as I was trying to change the mixture of chemicals and supplements your right arm was getting. I never finished.”

He squeezed her fingers again, his thumb gently caressing the back of her hand before his hand moved away and he resumed working on his robotic creation. “I’m touched by your concern, Padmé. Do you think the mixture would have worked?”

She sighed. “Does it matter?”

“Maybe.” He added another bolt, screwing it in. “This other Doctor is the one who probably took the arm you were trying to save. If he’d left it and woke you after eight hours instead of letting you sleep yourself out, I’d probably still have my right arm.”

“I honestly don’t know if it would have worked. My job isn’t exactly an exact science, most of the time.”

“But do you believe it would have worked?”

“Yes, Anakin I do.”

“There, you see?” He smiled at her understandingly. “It’s not your fault at all; it’s that inept physician who was trying to kill me. I’m lucky he only took the one arm.”

Padmé stared at him dumbfounded. “Anakin...”

“Oh no.” He pinned her with a look. “The guilt is not on your shoulders; my injury is not your fault.”

“Then how do you explain how I distracted you in your fight with Dooku?”

He blushed, surprising her, ducking his head back to his work, the intensity of his gaze the moment it was on hers almost stealing the breath from her lungs. “I told you I never forgot you.”

“Anakin.” His name was an unintentionally exasperated endearment on her lips.

He shrugged, adding another part to his new arm. “I didn’t know you were there, Padmé. When you told the troopers to cease firing, I tried to stop myself, but I couldn’t; I had to look at you to be sure I wasn’t imagining you. I had to be sure Dooku wasn’t using some Force trick. If anything, your shout saved me. Dooku was ready to slice me in half. If you hadn’t shouted your warning, I’d be dead, not just missing my arm.”

“But...”

“Nope.” He busied himself with the metallic creation they were piecing together. “I won’t accept a but. You’re just going to have to accept that you’re blameless in every way — except wanting to help.”

She laughed. “You’re incorrigible.”

“I know. It’s what makes me so forgettable.”

“I did *not* forget you, Anakin.”

“No?” He glanced at her before resuming his work. “Then why didn’t you recognize me on Geonosis. I recognized you — I would have recognized you anywhere.”

“You expected me to make the connection from the little boy with blonde hair who was this high.” She put her hand out at about half his current height before waving at his tall, too-handsome-by-half length. “To the Jedi you’ve become? That’s expecting a little much, don’t you think?”

He shrugged. “Maybe. But then, maybe not.”

“Maybe not?” She echoed the statement, knowing as she did the truth behind it. She’s recognized him subconsciously, she realized, she just hadn’t been able to connect the innocent little boy she’d known with the ferocious, powerful predator she’d seen in the Geonosian area. The little boy had been but a shadow of potential, now fully realized in the man before her. She shivered, pulling her lab coat around her without realizing how defensive the move looked. Subconsciously she needed to protect herself for he was dangerous to her. Not physically; she sensed he’d never hurt her, but emotionally. He had already made her think and feel things she shouldn’t.

Anakin glanced at her with hooded eyes before going back to his hand. “Yeah. Maybe you knew it was me without realizing it.”

She bit back a snappy, “Get out of my head!” and managed a smile, knowing he would have been impossible to deal with if he knew how closely he was following her thought pattern. She couldn’t afford to give him any more ammunition. “Maybe. Or maybe I thought you were someone else.”

He looked up at her curiously. “You mean you thought you recognized me?”

She bit the tip of her tongue. Oh brother — so much for not giving him more ammunition. Her nod was reluctant. “I thought you looked familiar. I just couldn’t place you and with everything that was happening I didn’t have time to dwell on it.”

“But you figured it out while I was fighting Dooku, right?”

She shook her head. “I didn’t have time then either. I had to tend Obi-Wan, and then you. I didn’t realize it until I had done your surgery and was talking to Obi-Wan.”

“Ah, but you thought you knew me. I know Obi-Wan called me by name — just how many Anakins do you know anyway?”

“Anakin!” She laughed, unable to help herself, pushing gently against his leg. “You’re teasing me!”

“As often as possible, Doctor.” His grin was slow, deliberately so. “You don’t smile enough.”

“I have been pretty miserable, haven’t I?”

“No more than I have. You’re prettier when you smile, Padmé.”

She blushed. “Flatterer. It won’t get you anywhere.”

“But it won’t make you leave either.” He pointed the hydrospanner at her and gestured grandly, teasingly. “Are you joining me for dinner tonight, milady? The chef assures me we have a marvelous feast coming soon. She made enough for both of us.”

“Is that an invite or an order, Skywalker?”

He looked wounded. “I wouldn’t dare order around my Doctor. She might remove something... vital.”

“Anakin!”

He winked at her. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone you looked.”

“I most certainly did not!”

“You didn’t change me into these shorts?”

“I did, but—”

“But?” He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

“You’re horrible; it’s a part of my job.”

He sat back as if satisfied. “You can play Doctor with me any day, Padmé. I like the thought of you taking off my clothes.”

"Anakin." She crossed her arms over her chest, looking at him pointedly. "We had to cut you out of your clothes. I had three other nurses and a clone helping me. It wasn't personal."

"You're awful defensive for something that wasn't personal."

"Bah!" She pushed off the stool and marched to the wall panel. "Chef?"

"Yes, *Doctor Naberrie?*"

"Jedi Skywalker is ready for his dinner."

"Will you be joining him again this evening, Doctor? We have a plate ready for you as well."

She met Anakin's challenging gaze across the room. He was daring her to run, to avoid him and their conversation. He was daring her to show that she didn't have the fire, the rebellion and spirit that she'd had when they first met. She smiled. "That's very thoughtful of you, Chef; I believe I will join him."

"Very good Doctor, the droid will be there shortly." The intercom clicked off.

Anakin watched as she moved back to her stool. "That wasn't so hard."

"Ha!" She slid back onto her stool. "We're supposed to be working on your new arm, not discussing how we had to doctor your unconscious tush."

"Tush?" The laughter in his voice was evident. "How very unprofessional of you, Doctor."

"Oh, push off." But she was smiling as she said it. She couldn't remember when someone had last felt comfortable enough around her to tease her. Cordé was about the only person who dared, and she hadn't seen her in weeks. "You really are incorrigible. I don't know how you ever made Jedi Knight."

He shrugged. "I've done my time, and fought my battles. I'm the youngest Knight ever, you know."

"Isn't pride against the Jedi code?"

He blinked at her, barely catching the teasing note in her voice before smiling sheepishly. "Maybe. But then, I'm no usual Jedi."

"Are you telling me they make exceptions for you?"

"Nah." He picked up the partially constructed arm and placed it on a nearby tray of parts. "I have to work extra hard to show that I'm capable, but they in turn have to show they trust me."

"In what way?"

"With emotions." He smiled faintly. "You may have or may not have noticed, but Jedi don't encourage any emotion that could possibly lead to attachment."

She arched an eyebrow. The Jedi weren't overly forthcoming with their code of conduct. "I hadn't. All I've heard is that Jedi are forbidden contact with their natural families; that they're forbidden to love."

“Ah, that’s where you’re wrong.” His eyes sparkled as he pushed himself backwards, leaning against the propped bed, watching her intently. “Jedi aren’t *forbidden* from anything really. It’s all a matter of how you view the code. For example, *There is no emotion, there is peace*. Now, if you take it literally, it means nothing can affect you and because nothing affects you, you find peace. Balance. This is the place Jedi draw their most powerful abilities from because it is where they’re most centered.”

“It seem pretty cut and dried. I don’t see how you could interpret it otherwise.”

“That’s how most people think. Now, the way I see it, is that there’s a word missing. Emotion is a metaphor, or better yet, an all encompassing word to mean ‘turmoil’. It’s not that there aren’t any emotions; it’s that there is no emotional turmoil. Going by that interpretation, Jedi are actually encouraged to feel, they just have to find a way of doing so that doesn’t create a conflict.”

“Isn’t that bending the rules?”

Anakin shrugged. “Obi-Wan is always telling me to think creatively.”

“I don’t think he intends for you to re-think the Jedi code.”

“Probably not, but I’ve had this discussion with him before and he seems to think I’m on to something. We haven’t been able to figure out how Master Windu isn’t breaking the code otherwise.”

“What do you mean?”

“Have you ever heard of Vapaad?”

She shook her head.

“I’m not surprised. Very few, even in the Jedi Order, have.”

“What is it?”

“A fighting style for lightsabers.” He smiled faintly. “A very unique and deadly form of which there is only one master — and that has very, very few students.”

“You don’t use it?”

Anakin shook his head. “Obi-Wan doesn’t know it, and none of my teachers were ever willing to train me. I know about it though. The Jedi using it must allow themselves to *enjoy* the fight. They have to let their emotions control their actions, dictate how they react. They have to feed off those emotions to gain insight, strength and speed.”

“Sounds dangerous.”

“It is.” Anakin smiled faintly. “Master Windu is the Master who created it and the only one who can wield it; he’s only taught one of his apprentices how to use it too. The danger is that in allowing yourself to enjoy the combat, if you let that enjoyment get out of hand, you can step over the boundary to the Dark side very, very easily.”

The knock on the door broke into their conversation and Anakin waved his hand at the door before Padmé could get up, opening it from across the room. “Over here.”

Padmé slanted an amused look at him. “If it’s so dangerous, why do they allow it to be taught?”

Anakin shrugged as she took the cart from the droid and sent it on its way. “It’s the most deadly of combat styles, but I’m not privy to the Master’s decisions. Vapaad requires balancing emotions, so, to bring us back full circle, because it doesn’t create turmoil, it’s still within the code.”

“Sounds like someone stretching the limits to me.”

“Exactly.” Anakin picked up his utensil, waiting eagerly as she slid the tray onto his lap and pull the cover off. He inhaled deeply. “Mmmm, smells wonderful.”

Padmé laughed softly. “Are you always this hungry?”

“Yup.” He dug in, effectively ending their conversation for the moment.

Through dinner they talked of lighter things, sharing amusing stories, catching up on where they’d been and what they’d been doing in the last ten years. He told her about his adventures with Obi-Wan, about their missions and how their team had become one of the most visible in the order. He spoke without pride, though she could see he was proud of his accomplishments. She, in turn, told him about her practice on Coruscant, and why she’d chosen to come along on the medical frigate when she’d been asked to assist.

When dinner was over, Padmé found herself reluctant to leave. “Have you had enough?”

Anakin patted his stomach with a satisfied smile. “Full to the brim. Your ship’s cook is better than the one at the Temple.”

“Or your own cooking when on a mission with Obi-Wan?”

He chuckled. “Actually, I can make quite a meal from just about anything. It may not be overly tasty for fancy, but it’s edible.”

She smiled in return. “I guess you’ll have to prove it someday.”

He blinked. “You’d let me cook for you?”

Padmé wondered what had possessed her as she nodded. “Call it a test to see just how well you can do it when your new arm is finished.”

“One I’ll be happy to pass with flying colors.” He checked the chrono before cocking his head to the side at her. “Shouldn’t you be sleeping? Your shift starts in less than four hours.”

“I’m reluctant to leave.” She admitted with a smile. “You’ve been wonderful company tonight, Anakin.”

“Teasing and all, Padmé?”

“Teasing and all. Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Reminding me there’s life beyond medicine.” She reached over to squeeze his fingers. “Good night, Anakin.”

He brought her captured fingers to his lips, kissing the back of her hand gently. “Good night, Padmé. Dream of me, Angel, for I will surely dream of you.”

She swallowed hard, tugging on her hand, and departed, unable to find her voice as his words echoed in her mind. *Dream of me, Angel.*

She took a deep breath as she turned the corner towards her quarters.

Dream of me, Angel.

She opened the door, stepped inside, not bothering to turn on the lights.

Dream of me, Angel.

As she shrugged out of her clothing and crawled into bed, she knew that wasn't going to be a problem.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10

The highlight of Padmé's days quickly became those few, precious hours at the end of her shift where she helped Anakin work on his arm. He teased her mercilessly, showing a wry, witty sense of humor she hadn't known he possessed. She teased him in return, the feeling of guilt over his injury ebbing more every day as his good humor and spirits buoyed her own.

She was amazed at how he'd accepted his injury. He didn't blame her, though he easily could have, instead focused on getting better, on improving his mechanical creation with the intention of "having words" with Helkor. How he'd found out the Doctor's name Padmé could only guess, but she didn't think that "discussion" would be a pleasant one.

Obi-Wan, attached to a clone unit based with their fleet, checked in as often as he could to see how Anakin's recovery was progressing. It amounted to one visit a week; a visit that interfered with the time they normally spent together.

Padmé hadn't been expecting Obi-Wan when she'd stepped into Anakin's room almost two weeks to the day since she'd met him last, and she stopped dead, the smile that had been forming on her lips dying before it was born. "Master Kenobi."

She was peevishly annoyed at his timing; Anakin was supposed to try his prosthetic on tonight and she'd been looking forward to it all day.

"Doctor Naberrie." Obi-Wan's tone didn't invite her to join them, though his expression was as neutrally warm as always. "Finishing your rounds for the night?"

She nodded reluctantly. "Anakin's always my last stop with my staff so new to his kind of injury."

"The last month hasn't made them veterans?"

Padmé stepped to Anakin's side, making a show of testing the strength of his grip on his left hand. She locked their fingers together, meeting his gaze. "Thankfully no other amputations have come in. Nothing non-fatal, that is. How does your hand feel, Anakin?"

She could see the frustration simmering in his gaze, knew he didn't welcome the intrusion of his old Master any more than she did, but he wasn't about to send Obi-Wan away. Not when Obi-Wan was his only link to news outside the infirmary — news she still refused to give him. He squeezed her fingers, playing along, amusement joining frustration. "Much better, Padmé. Your exercises are miracle workers."

She didn't dare glance at Obi-Wan, certain she's see disapproval for Anakin's familiar tone. "Glad to hear it. How's the project?"

"Ready for its first trial." He looked beyond her to Obi-Wan. "That is, unless you've something else you wanted to talk to me about first?"

Padmé busied herself with examining Anakin's arm, making a show of taking non-existent notes, mentally trying to push Obi-Wan out of the room. She wanted him to finish up quickly so she could have Anakin all to herself again. How dare he intrude upon the one area of her job that let her relax out here!

Obi-Wan cast a long look at Padmé before shrugging. "I'm just here to report back to the council on your readiness. We need you, Anakin. The fight may be in our favor, but the Jedi are the clone's commanders. Without enough of them, we can't field a large army."

"Then casualties have been heavy?"

Obi-Wan shook his head. "Not as heavy as some expected. Most of the Masters have been included in the fighting, so their units face the heaviest resistance. There's word of some kind of monster that's stalking the Jedi, but so few Jedi have fallen that it's hard to believe."

"A monster?" Anakin sounded skeptical. "I find that hard to believe myself. Have you been on the front much?"

"Daily."

"And I have the patients in bacta to prove it." Padmé looked pointedly at Obi-Wan before going back to Anakin's arm. She was straightening out the mechanical marvel, testing the tensions and servos to ensure they wouldn't damage his stump. "I think you know more about this thing than I do, Anakin. Are you ready to try it on?"

He nodded eagerly. "It'll be nice to have a right hand again. Maybe then you won't have to spoon feed me."

Her gaze jumped to his to find those blue eyes that so enchanted her sparkling with mirth and mischief. She shot him a cautionary glare, deliberately darting a look beyond him to Obi-Wan. His lips quirked and his expression challenged her. He didn't care if his old Master was here; he was going to enjoy her presence.

"Obi-Wan, could you help me with this?"

Obi-Wan held the metallic arm as she directed. She carefully connected the sensors and feeds to Anakin's arm. He watched avidly. "Nope, that's not where that goes."

She shot him a look. "Who's the Doctor here?"

"You are." He agreed affably. "But I'm the inventor. Slide that around to your left, that's right, now pull it over my shoulder."

"It's supposed to be connected to your arm, not your shoulder."

"It's a harness, Doc." He told her, tongue in cheek. "So that I can practice longer without wearing out my muscles as I have to develop them again. I may intend to be your prisoner forever, but I do like my little freedoms."

"Very practical, Anakin." Obi-Wan's voice broke in before Padmé could respond.

"Thank you, Master."

"Obi-Wan, Anakin." Obi-Wan smiled faintly. "You'll have to get used to calling me that eventually. You're no longer my Padawan, you know."

Anakin grinned. “Old habits die hard... Master.”

Padmé ducked her head to her job, fastening the ties around Anakin’s shoulder as he directed, sitting the stump of his arm perfectly with very minimal adjustments. She tugged a little, making the tight contact seal that would be required, and tied off the last of the straps.

The fingers on the hand twitched, making a faint clacking sound as they rubbed together, and Anakin grinned. “Hey, it works!”

“Don’t sound so surprised.” Obi-Wan told him dryly. “You always did like to tinker.”

“It’s not fully connected yet,” Padmé cautioned them. “Hold still, Anakin. I still have to connect the points that will allow you a full range of motion.”

He fidgeted with his left hand, trying to behave, almost squirming as he waited for her to finish. She glanced at Obi-Wan, her impatience with his presence disappearing in the humor of the moment. “Is he always this patient?”

“Oh yes.” Obi-Wan’s eyes sparkled with humor. “Always.”

Padmé connected the electrodes to the stump of Anakin’s arm one at a time, making sure she placed them where they needed to be, and finally stepped back. “Ok, that should do it.”

Anakin looked down at the metal monstrosity he’d created and made a face. “I hope there’s a glove or something that can hide this thing.”

“Are you kidding?” Padmé teased gently. “You’ll be all the rage when you get back to Coruscant. War wounds are a huge magnet — the girls won’t be able to resist you.”

“They already suffer from that affliction.” Obi-Wan’s comment was dry. “Try it out, Anakin.”

He frowned and made a fist with his left hand before slowly, consciously, attempting to do the same with the right. The gears shifted, whirring softly as the metal fingers slowly curled inwards, forming a fist of metal and wires. He relaxed, releasing the fist and the hands opened, the fingers twitching a little.

Neither Obi-Wan nor Padmé had expected it to be so quiet, and she said so. “It’s quieter than I thought it’d be.”

Anakin chuckled. “I can’t very well have my *hand* giving away my position when trying to sneak up on someone can I?”

Padmé smiled. “I suppose not. But just because you can form a fist doesn’t mean you’re ready to jump back into training.” Her tone was cautionary. “It takes days, sometimes weeks, before some patients adjust to having a mechanical replacement.”

Anakin lifted his arm, rotating the elbow joint, the servos making a soft noise as they worked. He extended his arm, reaching it out to lay it against her shoulder. Sweat was beading his brow, but he managed a roguish grin. “Nothing to it.”

She arched an eyebrow at him. “Oh really? Then I suppose I can release you back into Obi-Wan’s care since he knows the drills and sequences in which you’re going to have to

train yourself to adjust to your new arm? Or maybe you can just jump right into the thick of things on the front lines, picking up where you left off?”

“Enough, Padmé.” Obi-Wan’s comment was softened with a smile. “We understand that he’s not ready to return to active duty just yet. This is a heartening occasion, however. Anakin once again has a right hand.”

“Yeah, Doc, lighten up.”

She looked from one to the other before her face relaxed in a smile. “I’m sorry. I just don’t want you to think that just because your arm is built and now connected, that’s where the work ends.”

“You have made it quite clear that it’s not.” Anakin assured her. “I’ve got another couple of weeks at least before I can even think about picking up a lightsaber again.”

“Unless you’re ready to become a lefty.”

Anakin shot a dark look at Obi-Wan. “I fight as well with one hand as I do with the other. I’m just more comfortable with the right handed grip.”

Obi-Wan slapped Anakin on the shoulder. “I’m glad your spirits are high my friend. I’ll take my leave. Rest well and try not to monopolize the good Doctor, hmm?”

Anakin stuck his tongue out at Obi-Wan’s retreating back before making a face, the door closing behind his old Master. “Is it uncharitable of me to be glad he’s gone?”

“Hardly.” Padmé lifted her hand to cover his where it still rested on her shoulder, the metal cool under her palm. “You can take your hand off now, Anakin.”

His gaze slid to her and he flushed, lifting the arm and letting it drop back to his side. “Sorry. I forgot I left it there.”

“Can you feel anything through it?”

He smiled wryly. “A little, but I think I’ll need to tweak the nerve receptors some. There’s not as much feeling as I’d like.”

“It’s more than you had, Anakin.”

“True.” He paused for a moment, flexing the fingers of the mechanical hand. “I have an admission to make, Padmé.”

“Oh?”

He turned in the bed, sliding his legs over the edge and letting them dangle to the floor, his gaze catching and holding hers. Her breath caught in her throat at the intense look in his blue eyes. He stood slowly, as if not to scare her, bringing them almost flush. She had to crane her head back so not to lose eye contact, searching his gaze questioningly, even as her limbs refused to obey the command to step away.

His arms came up and he took a single partial-step, pulling her into them, the light weight of the mechanical one, almost perfectly match to his real one, settling across her shoulders. He sighed raggedly against her hair, resting his chin on the top of her head. “I wanted to finish my arm as soon as I could just so I would know what it’s like to hold you.”

The bubble popped, suffusing her with a feeling of warmth and peace. She swallowed hard, mentally fighting against the surge of feeling that followed his actions, her heart flip-flopping at his words. She slid her arms around his waist as she placed her head against his chest, silently relishing the feel of him. He was strong, lean, a presence that could have been — should have been — threatening. But she found it comforting. She felt protected, cherished, as he held her securely. She felt wanted; loved.

They stood in silence, his left hand gently stroking her hair, his chest rising and falling evenly under her cheek. She heard his breath catch, felt him tense, and then he moved. His arms shifted from her shoulders, from the platonic contact, drifting lower, to embrace her as a man embraces his lover; his wife.

His cheek brushed hers, tilting her head backwards with only the slightest of resistance. She was floating, suffused with feeling, and felt a silent thrill as his lips settled — for the briefest of moments — on hers, his real hand cupping her face, gently stroking his thumb across her chin. Her breath caught for half a second as she lost herself in the sensation.

His kiss was sweet, achingly so, tugging at her heart strings and pulled her into uncharted waters. She had no experience to base it on and no defenses to resist it. And she didn't want too. She was unprepared for the passion, the hesitancy and need in that simple brush of his mouth. Or for the response in her own.

Her head fell back to his chest, her ear pressed flush against the strong muscles, listening to her blood pounding in her ears and the racing of his heart. She could feel his want for her and wondered if he could feel her want for him as well. She closed her eyes, enjoying the feeling of being swept away, pretending for a moment that he wasn't injured, that he wasn't her patient and she wasn't his doctor.

Reality asserted itself after long moments and her throat closed as she realized what she was doing. "We can't do this." She forced herself to speak, hoping she didn't sound as choked as she felt.

"Do what?" His words rumbled through his chest and she felt them more than heard them.

"This." She slowly forced herself to let him go, stepping backwards, out of his embrace. "You're my patient, Anakin, it's not right."

Hurt flashed through his gaze as his arms fell away from her. "Is that all I am to you? Just your patient?"

"Of course not, I—" She stopped herself, taking a deep breath before she blurted out something neither of them was yet ready for. If they ever would be. "I... care for you Anakin. More than I should, and that puts us both in a dangerous position. You're a Jedi; I'm your Doctor. The ethical complications if we should be caught could ruin me, to say nothing of your career as a Jedi!"

"Caught doing what?" His gaze narrowed. "I only wanted to thank you; is that so much to ask? To show that I appreciate all you've done for me, and are continuing to do for me? It was a thank you, Padmé."

She flushed, but held his gaze steadily. His eyes were telling her something *completely* different. "You know as well as I do it was more than a thank you, Anakin." She looked

pointedly at the physical reaction he couldn't hide before meeting his gaze again.

He crossed his arms over his chest; an unconscious move she was certain he didn't realize he made and one that gave her hope for his swift recovery. "So I find you attractive. I've always found you attractive. I've idolized you, thought about you, since I was a boy. I won't apologize for a natural reaction to your presence, Doctor. Besides," his eyes assumed their familiar teasing twinkle. "It's nothing you haven't seen before."

"Anakin! This is serious."

The humor in his expression died, leaving behind only that soft, intense look. "I am being serious, Padmé. I know as well as you do that there can never be anything between us more than friendship." The look in his eyes almost broke her heart. They were full of longing, sadness; desire. "Is it so wrong of me to want to enjoy your company?"

"We shouldn't." She was bending under that intense gaze, her will slowly cracking. Friendship. Right. He was lying to her with his words while his stormy, emotional gaze promised her passion and adventure; if she would only acquiesce. They showed a determination, and intention; one that she had to resist; even if it meant a future alone.

"Why not?" He cocked his head at her almost challengingly, but she could see the hurt in his eyes. "Are you afraid?"

"Terribly." She smiled faintly at catching him off guard. "I think I'd better go. Good night, Anakin. Don't wear yourself out by staying up all night getting acquainted with your new arm."

"Padmé—"

She held up her hand, forestalling anything he'd have to say. "Don't, Anakin. I'll be back tomorrow to see how you're doing. Get some sleep."

"Good night, Padmé." His words were softly reluctant.

"Good night, Anakin." She turned on her heel and left the room, heading straight for her quarters. As she stepped inside she carefully closed and locked it behind her, sliding down as she brought her knees to her chest, burying her face in her knees.

What was I thinking? Her own voice echoed in her head. She hadn't been thinking. She'd been feeling. Feeling safe and protected and wanted. Feeling desirable. She'd been feeling, not thinking, and in that feeling she'd allowed Anakin Skywalker to kiss her. A simple, soft, undemanding kiss that had been achingly bittersweet.

A kiss that had sent her mind reeling so that she'd come close, so very close, in a moment of anger afterwards to blurting out feelings she hadn't even realized she had. Feelings that had snuck up silently, slowly, wiggling their way past her carefully planned defenses. They'd curled up so close that she hadn't realized they'd snuck in and begun to grow. They were painfully clear and obvious now that she'd had the chance to think about them and the reaction to his question.

And they were bound to get them both into a world of trouble if she let them get the better of her; for she'd almost told Anakin Skywalker she was in love with him. Her head slowly lifted, and she stared across the room at the blank wall.

She was in big trouble.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11

Padmé preoccupation the following day was noticeable. She was withdrawn, unable to focus or concentrate on conversations. She frequently lost her train of thought or missed important information from one or another of her reporting nurses. It hadn't helped she'd slept little, less than two hours, having tossed and turned with an ache she recognized clinically.

After two hours of attempting to do her rounds, she found Mik in Lana's presence and informed them that she was taking the day off. Her nurses were relieved, having noted that she was lacking her normal professionalism, and promised to call her in the event of something serious happening. In fact, they insisted she take several days off and were thrilled when she agreed. This was their opportunity to show how capable they really were.

Once done, Padmé retired to her quarters and crawled back into bed. She slept deeply, taking the opportunity to catch up on some of the hours she was missing. The rest of the day and next morning passed, and she woke in the following afternoon feeling rested and refreshed. She was shocked to see just how long she'd slept, but a quick comm. to Mik assured her that nothing had happened that she'd been required for. Battles were non-existent as the army was currently in transit to their next deployment zone.

Padmé found her focus was back, though still skewed towards one patient in particular, and she felt more capable of coping with her preoccupation.

But she didn't go see him.

Instead, she made for the mess hall and sat herself in one corner, taking the opportunity to eat among the population of the ship. She spoke with few people, though several stopped to thank her for the work she did to help civilians accidentally caught in cross fires. She had four recovering from serious burns in bacta; side effects from their speeder exploding while trying to escape the conflict area.

Padmé took the opportunity to explore the ship. She stopped in briefly to speak with the commanding officer, checked the promenade deck, and eventually made her way to the viewing deck. She didn't spend much time any any place, feeling restless, nervous, as if something was happening and she wasn't yet aware of it.

Though what else could be happening when she'd just realized she was in love with Anakin Skywalker was beyond her. She paused on the viewing deck as she contemplated the question. Was she really in love with him, or was she simply confusing strong feelings of... *something...* for something else?

She easily conjured his image in her mind. His roguish good looks, the tilt of his dangerously appealing smile and the heat in his gaze. She closed her eyes against the longing that quickly followed. She'd been spending every minute she had when off duty with him.

She'd spent hours sitting and talking with him, getting to know him again. She'd invested time and energy, but had she really done anything differently than she normally did?

Yes. The answer was immediate. She'd taken personal responsibility because she believed his injuries and her inability to correct them were her fault. She was too close to the situation, too involved and she needed perspective. She opened her eyes to look out into the expanse of stars that seemed to go on forever.

While Anakin was her patient, she wasn't going to get perspective. She took a deep, steadying breath. Tonight she was going to crawl into a hot bath with a good, long book and relax. She would lose herself in a fictional world where relationships, like the one she wanted with Anakin, were possible.

And she wouldn't go see him; Mik had been drilling him in the mornings on his exercises. He really didn't need to see her. Not for more than her company. And now, with two arms, he was more than capable of fending for himself. He would be ready to leave the infirmary for regular quarters in a day or two. His unconscious use of his cybernetic arm was proof that he would adapt quickly.

She wouldn't go see him. She pushed off the wall where she'd begun leaning and strode from the room, heading back towards her quarters. For one night Anakin could get along without her.

How then, she asked herself silently several minutes later, contemplating the closed door before her, *did I end up outside his door?* She wondered if she was brave enough to answer the question herself. She took a deep breath. She should turn and walk away. She wasn't on duty, she had no obligation to stop in and see him; he knew his exercises.

She made a face. *You're a coward, Padmé.* She lifted her hand to knock since she wasn't here on official business. She *had* promised him to check in on him today — yesterday. Maybe she could get away with that pretense. *Liar.* She tried to squash the little voice in the back of her mind with little success. *He may not know how you feel, but at least you could be brave enough to admit it.* She didn't dare. Not yet, and especially not out loud. Out loud would make it final, definitive. Something she wasn't sure she could handle. It was something that had the power to break her.

"Come in."

His voice was soothing to her high strung nerves, like a balm to tight muscles, skirting down her spine and warming her heart. She knew at that moment she should run before he knew it was her. She made to leave, wondering if he could sense she was outside his door when the door slid open and she was well and truly caught.

Anakin was sitting on the floor in the middle of his room, his eyes closed. His hair hung down across his brow, almost matted in place by the sweat that glistened across his skin. He was covered in a loose robe that hung open loosely at his chest, revealing a sheen of sweat glistening under the harsh lighting over muscles that rippled and shifted with each breath he took. It also effectively hid his arms, showing them from the wrist down where they lay, palms upward, on his crossed knees.

She felt her mouth go dry wondering silently if it was more of a crime for him to wear clothing and let her imagination fill in the rest, or for him to be naked and let her eyes feast. She pushed the thoughts away as she stepped into his room, the door closing without a sound behind her. "Good afternoon, Anakin."

His eyes didn't open, but his mouth twitched into a small smile. "Padmé."

She nodded, even though he couldn't see her. "Yes."

"You're nervous."

She folded her hands in front of her so he wouldn't see her hands shaking in the event he opened his eyes at that moment. "I'm preoccupied." She wondered who she was trying to fool more as the words left her lips.

"Anything I can help with?"

"I think you've done enough." She winced at the dry tone she could hear in her own voice.

His eyes slowly opened and his smile disappeared, his brow knotting as he looked at her. "You're preoccupied with something I've done?"

She let out a long, silent breath, shaking her head automatically. "Nothing you've *done*, Anakin."

"Something I said?" He cocked his head at her.

She shook her head again. "No."

He arched his eyebrows at her. "That doesn't leave a lot for you to be preoccupied about."

"It leaves plenty." She couldn't help the way her gaze traveled over his shoulders, down, across his muscular chest, across his trim, fit waist...

He chuckled softly. "The way I look? Don't tell me you're professionalism is slipping, Doctor."

"I'm not here as your Doctor, Anakin." Her gaze came back to his, uncertain if it was a good idea. He saw far too much, read her with seeming ease. "I'm off duty today."

He rose to his feet, stretching out his left hand to pick a towel off the bed before rubbing the sweat from his face and chest. "Then you're here as a friend?"

She laughed softly at the eagerness in his tone. "Yes. I'm here as your friend."

"Great!" He waved her towards her normal stool, his eyes twinkling with that familiar, teasing light. "Can you talk to my Doctor then? She's really up tight, I mean, she's no fun at all. Has no sense of humor."

"Oh really?" She settled herself on the stool as he sat on the bed, his feet touching the floor as he rubbed his head, absently switching the towel from one hand to the other and using his metallic hand.

Anakin grinning wickedly. "Really. She's always wearing these awful looking lab coats too; just the kind of garment a guy wants to tear off a woman because she's using it as a shield."

“You don’t say?” She arched an eyebrow at him in turn, crossing her arms over her chest, her lips twitching. “I should speak with your Doctor then; I wouldn’t want you to embarrass her by that sudden urge. What would *you* have her wear that wouldn’t produce such a reaction?”

The towel stopped as he stared at her and blinked. “What would *I* have her wear?”

She nodded, wondering if she was swimming in waters that were much too deep.

“Well, take for example what you’re wearing.” He motioned to her slacks and top. “It looks comfortable for starters. The pants and sweater are a flattering color on you—”

“Thank you.”

“—Your welcome — and the fit is just right. Now, let’s say you put a lab coat over that and now you have a drab, straight, no lines, no nonsense outfit that just makes my hands itch to tear it off. It hides everything and I swear one of these days I won’t resist.”

“Anakin!”

He grinned roguishly. “Consider yourself fairly warned, milady.” He winked at her. “So how come you’re off duty?”

“I couldn’t concentrate yesterday, so I took a few days off.” She answered honestly. She didn’t have to tell him why, but she wasn’t about to lie if he asked. “I figure Mik and Lana are seasoned enough now that if I’m really needed it’s because of something major. Nothing I do is really all that difficult. Any of the really bad injuries are usually fatal.”

“Ah.” Anakin smiled knowingly. “So you searched out my handsome face for company.”

She chuckled. “Your looks had little to do with it.”

“You don’t like the way I look?” He sounded almost boyishly disappointed.

“There’s nothing wrong with the way you look.”

“Really? I just don’t appeal to *you*?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Then, you do find me attractive?”

“Devilishly handsome.” She grinned teasingly. “Heavy on the devilish. I never pegged you as someone who would fish for compliments.”

“From you? I’ll take them any way I can get them.”

“Flatterer.”

“As often and as outrageous as you’ll let me, milady.” He grabbed her hand, planting a soft kiss on the back of it. “Anything to see you smile.”

She tugged half-heartedly on her hand, but he didn’t let it go. “I’m going to need that back, Anakin.”

“I think I’ll keep it.” He told her conversationally, linking his fingers to hers. “It fits just right inside my hand.”

She blushed heavily; red staining her cheeks a deep crimson. “I... don’t... Ani...”

“Have I made you speechless, Angel?” His voice was soft, caressing, sending a wave of anticipation crawling down her spine. “I can think of far more enjoyable ways to leave you speechless.”

“I... thought we agreed this wasn’t a good idea...”

He tugged on her hand, pulling her off the stool. “You objected because of being my doctor. You’re not my Doctor today, Padmé.”

She almost stumbled, but his right hand came out to steady her, gently drawing her closer until she was standing between his legs, looking up into those blue eyes that had haunted her dreams ever since he’d awakened. She pulled on her hand again, weakly. “I’m still your Doctor, and you’re still a Jedi. Please... Anakin. We can’t... I can’t...”

His left hand lifted to cup her face, his thumb sliding over the smooth skin of her cheek. “I don’t have to be a Jedi.”

“You already are.”

“I’d give it up if you asked me too.”

“I would never... I couldn’t...” She took in a shaky breath. “I wouldn’t ask you to do that, Anakin. I know how much you’ve wanted this.”

“I achieved my goal. I’m a Jedi Knight.” His eyes searched hers, and she could see the sincerity shining in his gaze. He really meant it. He meant every word he was saying. All she had to do was ask and he’d never look back.

“Is that all it was? A goal? You have no desire to use the powers you have, to put them towards helping others?”

“I promised I’d free the slaves on Tatooine. Now that I’m a Jedi Knight, I can finally make good on that promise.”

“But you can’t do that if you’re not a Jedi Knight.” She took a deep breath. “I won’t let you throw away your dreams for me.”

“You’re always a part of that dream, Padmé.” He gently stroked her cheek again, his eyes drinking in the sight of her. The warmth in his gaze made her knees weak. “Is that so hard to believe?”

“It’s hard to believe we’re having this conversation at all.” She swallowed against the lump in her throat. “Anakin, we can’t do this. I should go.”

His fingers tips on her face were gentle, curving around to slide along her jaw line until her cheek was cradled in the palm of his hand. “Probably. But do you want to go?”

Her heart pounded painfully in her chest. She didn’t want to go. She had no desire to be anywhere else than where she was at that very moment, and she knew he could see it in her eyes. “It’s not a matter of want—”

“Yes, it is.” He cut her off gently. “Do you want to leave, Padmé? To leave me alone, to be alone?”

She shook her head mutely, her voice suddenly deserting her completely.

“Me neither.” His head dipped forward a little, his breath feathering across her cheeks as he searched her eyes. ‘I’m going to kiss you, Padmé.’ His voice was barely a whisper, his eyes having turned into twins pools of deep cerulean fire. “I’ve thought of little else since you were last here.”

Her breath caught, her lips parting, though in protest or acquiescence she wasn’t entirely certain. He didn’t give her the chance to speak as his lips settled on hers. Her eyes closed and her head fell back as he pulled her forward, his mouth hot and demanding. Her hair spilled across his hand as he broke the single tie holding it in place. He groaned against her mouth, his left hand sliding deep into the wealth of chocolate silk that tumbled about her shoulders.

Her hands encountered his barely covered thighs as she was brought flush against the edge of the bed, chest to chest with him. Her hands gripped without thought, digging into his muscles as she felt her knees weaken, threatening to collapse under the onslaught of sensation as he deepened the kiss. And she let him, her mouth opening under his, moving, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

She challenged him unknowingly with that kiss, daring him. She felt dizzy, giddy, her knees weakening as she was completely swept away by the taste of him. Spicy, dangerous; forbidden. She shouldn’t be kissing him and she didn’t care.

He angled her head, his right hand encircling her waist, the metal unfamiliar but not unpleasant through the softness of her shirt. She clung to him as her feet left the ground, one arm sliding under her knees, pulling her upwards and back until she was sitting across his knees.

Her head and shoulders encountered the softness of his pillow and her eyes flew open in alarm as he pulled away, leaving her half reclined across his lap and bed. He watched her, braced on his right arm above her as his eyes searched her face.

“Anakin?” Her voice cracked.

“You are so beautiful.” His tone was hushed, awed. His hand trembled as he reached up to brush a tendril of her hair off her cheek.

Her tongue darted out to lick her lips and his eyes traced the movement, knowingly catching the tell-tale hitch in her breath, and her deep, uneven breathing. His eyes sparkled, turning a deeper royal blue as they watched her.

“I...”

He silenced the protest as it formed on her lips, ducking down to capture her lips one again. He drank from them like a man dying of thirst who’d just found an oasis. Her hands crept up of their own violation, encircling his neck, as she kissed him back. She was boneless in his arms, clinging to him like a life-line, the uncharted waters of desire beckoning her with the siren’s song of his kiss, his touch.

His left hand slid down the side of her face, mapping the contour of her ear, the curve of her jaw, the tilt of her chin. Those soft finger tips slid down over the smooth column of her neck, down, across her sweater until they curved around the swell of her hip where it rested in

his lap. She gasped against his mouth as his hand slid under her sweater to settle warmly on the bare flesh of her side.

He tore himself away as if burned, sitting up, dragging in a lungful of air as he dug both hands into his hair. She watched him, unable to control her own erratic breathing, her heart feeling as if it would leap from her chest. She was on fire, hot and cold all at the same time. “Anakin?” Her voice was low, throaty, so rough with want she barely recognized herself.

He froze and held up a hand to her, silently pleading for a moment of time.

The light-headed feeling was starting to fade, and Padmé felt reality reasserting itself once more. She felt doubt creep in; making her question the sensations she’d just been feeling. Surely she hadn’t just lost all knowledge of time and space while cradled in his arms. Surely she hadn’t been willing to let him touch her, to kiss her, like he had every right. Surely she hadn’t been willing to surrender completely. A chill spiraled down her spine and she shivered.

“Are you cold?”

She shook her head at his soft question. “No. Are you?”

His smile was self-mocking as his hands dropped into his lap. “If I get any hotter, I’ll burst into flame.”

She blushed. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be.” He sent her an odd look, one she couldn’t interpret. His eyes were still dark, cloudy; bedroom eyes demanding to be sated. Yet he held back. “Are you alright, Padmé?”

“I’m fine.”

He exhaled slowly. “I’m sorry about that.”

Her color darkened as she held his gaze. “Me too.” But her voice held little conviction. She couldn’t very well be sorry about a kiss that had made her forget completely about where she was and why kissing him was a bad idea. Why getting *involved* with him was a bad idea.

He reached out and carefully straightened her sweater, his metal hand jerking a little as he concentrated on being gentle. She watched him, completely disarmed by his actions. He wasn’t consciously able to use that hand yet, though he was more tender, more controlled with it when he didn’t seem to realize its use.

He looked boyishly uncertain of himself for a brief moment until he lifted his head, a small, self-satisfied smile on his lips that was at odds with his mournful tone. “I ruined your hair.”

Her eyes widened as she remembered what he’d done to her hair tie, her hand going automatically to her head. She could feel it. It was draped around her shoulders, under her back, cushioning her head where his hand had once been. She sat up and he moved away, getting to his feet and walking across the room, his steps even, balanced; once again the essence of the predator she’d seen in the Geonosian arena.

She swallowed against the lump in her throat and slid to the edge of the bed, running her hands through her hair as she did.

Anakin stopped across the room, putting both hands on one wall and leaning his weight against them.

“You shouldn’t stress it that way.”

“Pardon?”

She waved to his arm before attempting to pull her hair into a serviceable knot. “Your right arm. Putting all of your weight on it this soon is usually bad for it so soon.”

He pushed off the wall and turned so he could put his back against it. “Better?”

She nodded. “Much. How’s it feel?”

“Strange.” He admitted, not talking just about his arm. “Sometimes it tingles. Sometimes it aches. Other times, like just now, I forget its metal.”

“So soon?”

“You make one hell of a distraction, Padmé.”

Padmé pushed herself off the bed and gave up on her hair, leaving it loose around her shoulders to hang down beyond her waist as she faced him. “I... didn’t come here to...” her gaze darted to the bed and she colored again, clearing her throat before restarting. “I think you’re probably well enough to go back to your quarters, Anakin. From here on out there are just the exercises for you to continue with. There’s little more I or my staff can do for you.”

He arched an eyebrow at her. “Really?”

She wondered if her face could get any redder. “Really. It’s for the best. I can’t afford to keep you here.”

“Too much of a distraction, am I?”

“Much.”

His expression was solemn, almost uncertain. “This isn’t because of the kiss, is it?”

“Partly.” She took a deep breath. “I can’t maintain my objectivity with you, Anakin. I don’t think it’s a good idea for me to continue seeing you.”

He pushed off the wall, taking several steps until he was standing directly in front of her, searching her gaze. His hands came up to grasp her shoulders, gently rubbing the fabric as he examined her expression. “You don’t mean that.”

“I do, Anakin.” She fought back the burning behind her eyes, determined not to cry; not to tear up with him in the room. She hadn’t intended to come here and do this, but after what had just happened, she couldn’t very well continue on as if nothing had happened. She wasn’t equipped to deal with the conflicting emotions he unleashed so easily with his touch. “I don’t think I should see you anymore.”

“Don’t go away, Padmé.” His tone was soft, pleading. “Now that I’ve found you again, I couldn’t bear it if you just disappeared like before.”

“I won’t be going anywhere, Anakin.” She managed to smile for him. “You will. Obi-Wan’s had a room ready for you since you were pulled out of bacta; I think it’s for the best if

you move over there.”

“It’s on another ship?”

She nodded mutely.

“I won’t go.” His tone was rebellious. “You can’t just order me away and expect me to go because you can’t handle the tension between us. That’s not fair to me, or to you.”

“It’s safer!” She pulled out of his arms but had nowhere to go as her legs hit the edge of the bed behind her. “Don’t you see? As long as you’re here I’m putting all of my other patients in danger!”

“How is that my fault?”

She stopped, staring at him, a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach. He was right. It wasn’t really *his* fault that she found him so distracting. He couldn’t help being who and what he was. Just as she couldn’t help being attracted to him. “It’s not; it’s mine. I can’t... I can’t be your Doctor anymore, Anakin.”

“Don’t think me ungrateful, but I never wanted you for my Doctor anyway.” He leaned forward, bracing his arms on either side of her, trapping her against the bed. They were nose to nose, eye to eye.

She gripped the bed behind her, digging her fingers into the mattress to resist the temptation to touch him. “This is a bad idea.”

“I know.”

“I should be going.”

“I know.”

“I don’t want to hurt you, Anakin.”

“And you don’t want to be hurt.” His expression was contrite. “I’m sorry if I scared you; I can’t help what you do to me.”

“Please step back.”

“I can’t.” His gaze dropped to her lips, and her breath caught. “You taste so sweet, Padmé. I want to kiss you again.”

“Please don’t.” Her protest was but a whisper.

His gaze came back to hers, his face barely a breath away from her own. “Why not?”

“Because you’ll hurt me.”

“Never.” His lips were gentle on her cheek, brushing softly against her skin as he spoke. “I’d never hurt you, Padmé.”

She closed her eyes, tears burning against the back of her eyelids. “Please, Anakin...” She had no where to run and couldn’t find the strength to push him away. She didn’t *want* to push him away, didn’t want to fight him. She wasn’t even sure if she was asking him to stop or continue, and wouldn’t have been able to answer if asked.

His hands lifted and cupped her face, the metal of the right one cool against her skin. “Padmé?”

“Anakin.” She lifted her hands to grasp his wrists, opening her eyes to find he had backed away a fraction and was looking at her concerned. Tenderness, reverence was in every touch. She blinked a couple of times, noting the alarm that entered his gaze as he saw the tears in her eyes. “I can’t do this.”

“Do you want me to leave?”

“No.” The word was barely a whisper. “But I don’t dare let you stay. We can’t give in to this.”

“If I let you walk out of here, Padmé, can you promise me that I’ll see you again?”

“Only if you end up on my operating table.”

“Forgive me, milady, if I don’t jump at the prospect.”

She smiled at his dry tone, the tension between them ebbing somewhat. “Absolutely.”

“Can you at least keep your promise?”

“Which one? I’ve already helped you build your arm.” She flexed her hand where it rested on the metal wrist, tapping her finger against the metal.

He leaned forward and placed a gentle kiss on her cheek, his mouth pausing by her ear. “I owe you dinner; either at my place or yours.”

She froze. Dinner. A courting ritual. A romantic evening without any chance of interruption. She swallowed hard. She’d made the offer teasingly, before she’d found her attention almost completely consumed with him. Dinner with him would be dangerous. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, Anakin.”

He dropped his hands and stepped away to give her breathing room. “Good or not, I intend to show you that I can and will be capable of using my right arm as I’ve always been. You did say it was the finer control points I would need to work on.”

“But you don’t have to prove them to me.”

“You’re not getting out of it that easily, Doc.” The teasing light returned to his eyes. “I promise I won’t kill you with my cooking.”

“It’s not your cooking that worries me.” She managed to keep her tone light. “Do you want to tell Obi-Wan or should I put together an official notice to say you’re leaving my medical ward?”

“Obi-Wan’s going to thrilled.” He grinned. “I’ll tell him.”

“Tell me what?”

Please no. Padmé froze at the sound of the pleasantly accented voice from the doorway. He wasn’t supposed to be on the ship, or even in the area. She was certain her face was still tinted pink, her eyes were red from fighting tears and her hair was a mess. Obi-Wan was the last person she wanted to see, especially when he was likely to draw the conclusion, the *right*

conclusion, as to what they'd been doing. Anakin turned his head, keeping her shielded with his body.

Obi-Wan Kenobi was lounging in the doorway, watching them with a polite look of interest.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12

“Master.”

“Anakin. I trust you’re not *monopolizing* the good Doctor?”

There was no mistaking the censure in his tone and Padmé could feel the color in her face climbing again.

Anakin’s tone betrayed only a part of the frustration he was feeling at the interruption. “We were having a discussion.”

“I see that.”

Anakin bristled. “It was a *private* discussion, Obi-Wan.”

“You don’t say.”

Anakin strode towards Obi-Wan and, to Padmé’s surprise, physically pushed him out of the room. The door closed behind them with a click, muffling their voices. Curious, she moved forward and put her ear to the door.

“—unnecessary, don’t you think?” Obi-Wan was saying.

Anakin’s comeback was without remorse. “I’ve never liked sharing Padmé. What makes you think I’d start now?”

“You haven’t seen her in ten years.” Obi-Wan’s remark was pointed. “Hardly a basis in which to form an opinion.”

“You didn’t come here just to lecture me on the morals of being a Jedi, did you? Because if you did, it can wait until I’m settled back in my room.”

Padmé giggled softly at the surprise in Obi-Wan’s next remarks. “She’s letting you go?”

“She’s pushing me away.” Anakin corrected. “Apparently I’m able bodied enough to do without her.”

“The sooner the better.” Obi-Wan agreed. “When can you rejoin the fleet?”

“We hadn’t discussed that yet, but I’ve another two weeks of exercises to do before I’m allowed to even consider flying or wielding more than a training saber and that’s at the very minimum.”

She didn’t hear Obi-Wan’s reply, but the sound of a cloth-covered slap and a chuckle from Anakin reassured her that his response was enthusiastic.

“I don’t suppose I could impose on you to bring over a set of my clothes, could I?”

“Certainly, old friend. Anything else?”

She could almost see Anakin shaking his head. "Once I'm able to change, I can get anything else I might need."

"I will return shortly then." She heard the boot heels ringing on the deck plate and pulled back just as the door opened. Anakin stepped into the doorway and she moved away, hot, guilty color flooding her face. "Hear anything interesting, Doc?"

"I should be going." She dodged the question, looking beyond him to the corridor. He hadn't moved from the doorway and was blocking the only escape route.

"So you keep saying."

"But I mean it this time." She waved to his position. "But you seem to have other ideas."

"Just one." There was no mistaking the glint in his eyes. "But Obi-Wan will be returning shortly. I think you should come over and see me settled."

"I can't."

"You're off duty. Why not?"

"You know why not."

"You don't want to risk being seduced."

It wasn't a question, but it wasn't a statement she could deny, or confirm, either. If he set his mind on seducing her, he would get very little resistance. Who was she kidding? If he seduced her, it wouldn't be seduction at all and she'd be a willing, eager participant. The thought was as terrifying as it was thrilling. "It's for the best, Anakin. Just let this go."

"I can't." He stepped into the room, leaving the way to exit clear. "But I won't press the issue. Go ahead, leave if you want."

She took a step towards the door before hesitating. "Just like that?"

"Just like that." His smile was faint. "I do have one condition."

"I knew it."

He grinned, his eyes dancing. "You're going to promise me dinner — twice."

"I haven't agreed to once yet."

"You did tell me you never break a promise to a patient."

"You won't be a patient anymore."

"Irrelevant." His tone was smug. "I was a patient when you made that promise, so you're honor bound to keep it. The second dinner will be my treat; a surprise."

"This is a really bad idea, Anakin."

"Take it or leave it, Padmé. Or Obi-Wan might walk through that door to find you stretched across my bunk moaning with pleasure." His eyes glittered and she knew he was more than willing to carry out that threat despite the adverse reaction to his own career.

Her body was suffused with a sudden, heavy heat at his words and she swallowed hard. “Dinner. Let me know where and when.”

She ran from his room before she gave into the weakening in her knees, the desire to take him up on that threat. Threat! Ha! She stopped at the end of the corridor, leaning back against the wall and putting one hand over her racing heart. That hadn’t been a threat, but a promise, like the one to tear off her lab coat.

Two dinners with Anakin. One in the privacy of his — or her — home, the other of his choosing. With her luck, he’d choose to have a picnic in the middle of his bed! She looked back down the corridor, towards Anakin’s room, and saw him poke his head out. He grinned boyishly, winking at her as if he could read her thoughts.

Padmé blushed and moved on, unable to stay in the same area anymore without moving. And she chose to move away before giving in to the impulse of running straight back into his arms. She was an adult for cripes sake! A rational, analytical, controlled adult who valued her career far too much to risk it for a fling with some reckless Jedi Knight! She wasn’t nearly that impulsive, was she?

She made a face. Yes she was. She was more than willing if the rioting feelings he brought out were any indication. Willing and totally obsessed with him. She rubbed one hand over her forehead, not paying much attention to where she was going as she tried to sort out her conflicting emotions.

Anakin was an enigma. A Jedi Knight whose own interpretation of the code made her think of things she knew to be forbidden to him. Not to mention her own oath as a doctor! Good heavens, was she actually entertaining the idea of a... a *fling* with the handsome Jedi? Her mouth went dry at the thought.

Entertaining? No, wishing, hoping and yearning for one was more like it. She felt terrified at the prospect, and wasn’t unaware of the conflict. She felt terrified of what would happen if she didn’t. What would she miss out on if she refused to take the chance, to offer him the very thing that she couldn’t, didn’t dare? It was frustrating and confusing. More than ever she wished Cordé were there to lend an ear and a shoulder. Her friend would have been thrilled, considering Anakin was the first, and only, man she’d ever considered throwing her career over.

“Doctor Naberrie.”

She almost jumped out of her skin at the soft address, her hand flying to her breast in surprise. “General Kenobi! Oh goodness, you frightened me!”

His usual half-smile was in place. “My apologies; that was not my intention.”

He carried a small bag in one hand that could only be Anakin’s clothing. She fought to keep a telling blush from her cheeks. “You’re forgiven. Where are you off to?”

Obi-Wan held up the bag. “Anakin tells me you’re releasing him from the ward.”

She nodded, though her mouth was dry. “I am.”

“Then he’s ready to return to active duty and the action at the front.” The way he phrased it suggested he’d better be.

“Unfortunately, no, he’s not.” She fought the surge of guilt at the words. He was ready for action; just not the kind of action Obi-Wan was talking about. “He’s still at least a couple of weeks away from being comfortable with his arm, Obi-Wan, and he will need to retrain himself to do even the barest of basics without twitching. He needs your patience more than your insistence.”

“We need him, Padmé.” Obi-Wan’s admission was grim. “Far more than either you or he realize. We’ve been paired up to search for this supposed monster that’s hunting Jedi and I have orders from the council that mean we start our search tomorrow; Anakin will have to be ready.”

“He’s not.” Alarm raced through her. Anakin’s arm wasn’t even a week old and they wanted to send him back into battle? She grabbed Obi-Wan’s arm, the sense of urgency and dread that swept over her almost overpowering. “You can’t send him into battle yet, Obi-Wan. He can barely hold his utensils and he hasn’t even tried to hold a lightsaber. The council doesn’t understand the recuperation time these injuries take. This is a delicate time for Anakin, slip up now and he may never regain full use of his arm!”

“I’m sorry, Padmé, but they wouldn’t give me any longer.” He looked pointedly at the forearm she held in a death grip. “You should have received a communiqué from them yesterday.”

“I was off duty.”

He pinned her with a look that suggested he had a good idea why, but she didn’t shy away from his gaze. Let him see what she would. One of her patients, the patient she cared most about, was going to be thrown to the nexu like shaak to slaughter and she wasn’t about to stand by and let it happen.

“I see.”

“No, you don’t.” She released his arm, her eyes flashing. “And neither does the council. Anakin doesn’t go anywhere until he’s fully recuperated; you can tell the council he won’t be released today nor tomorrow. He’ll be released when he can return to active duty. Take his clothes and get out. Good Day General Kenobi!”

He opened his mouth, as if to protest, and she crossed her arms over her chest, arching her eyebrows at him, daring him to try and usurp her prerogative as a trained physician and care giver. He looked ready to argue that she was being too over protective. His mouth slowly closed as he seemed to realize she wouldn’t be budged. Finally, he spoke. “The council will not be happy.”

“I’m not here to please the council, Obi-Wan. I’m here to save lives, in this case Anakin’s. Putting him into battle so soon without having the time to regain full use of his arm is as good as a death sentence. I won’t stand by and watch as his life is thrown away needlessly.”

“The council could request your resignation from the military.”

She jutted her chin out. “Then let them. I will be more than willing to tell the inquiry that will ensure as to why I am not permitting Anakin’s release to active duty.”

He regarded her shrewdly. “I only hope you are doing this with his best interests in mind, Doctor, and not your own.”

“His best interests are my only concern. Get off my ship.”

Obi-Wan bowed grandly, dropping the bag at her feet. “His lightsaber exercises are in there as well as his weapon. A pleasure, as always, milady.”

Padmé breathed out a long, silent breath as Obi-Wan moved away, back towards the docking pods. Whatever he’d seen in her gaze, or felt in her emotions had probably been enough to damn both Anakin and herself. But nothing had yet happened beyond a kiss or two; surely Jedi were permitted some enjoyment of physical contact. She pushed the thought away. Whatever Obi-Wan had thought he’d seen wasn’t her concern.

She scooped the bag into her arms, taking a deep breath to calm her nerves. Anakin’s scent clung to the bag and enveloped her. It was calming and exciting all at once, reminding her of exactly what she’d just done. She’d come to the decision to let Anakin return to regular quarters in the Jedi section, and now, when Obi-Wan had revealed their intentions, revoked the permission.

She turned on her heel and headed back towards Anakin’s room. He was expecting to go and he deserved to know why she’d suddenly changed her mind. Forget the fact that she wasn’t on duty; Padmé wasn’t about to let the Jedi council throw Anakin’s life away when she’d gone to so much trouble to save it. If anything happened to him... she pushed the thought away.

Anakin, once fully healed, was a force to be reckoned with. It was her job to see that he made it that far.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13

"I thought you were leaving; or rather, I was."

Padmé held the bag out to him as she stepped through the door. "There's been a change in plans. You're not being released yet, Anakin."

He almost dropped the bag as he was taking it from her and paused. "Why?"

Padmé let go of her grip on the bag, folding her hands together in front of her as she fought the need to touch him. If she touched him, her focus would desert her and this was a very important matter. "I met Obi-Wan on his way back to see you."

"And he convinced you I shouldn't be released?" Anakin sounded doubtful.

"No." Padmé took a deep breath. "The council wants to pair the two of you to hunt this rumored monster. Starting tomorrow."

"I told him I wasn't ready for duty yet."

"I know and I'm glad you know your limitations." Padmé managed a slight smile. "It seems the council can't afford *not* to hunt this thing. I told Obi-Wan very plainly that for the duration, until *I* feel you're ready, you will remain under my care."

"I don't want you to be my Doctor, Padmé."

"I know, but what could I do? I can't let them send you into battle before you're ready, Anakin. You'd die and then I'd... I'd..." Her throat closed and, to her horror, tears welled in her eyes.

He dropped the bag to the side, taking a single stride to pull her into his arms. She went willingly, closing her eyes against the pain even the thought of his death brought. He stroked her back gently, kissing the top of her head as her arms encircled his waist. "You'd what, Padmé?"

"I don't know what I'd do." Her words were whispered. "I can't bear the thought of your death, Anakin."

"I'm very good at what I do, Padmé. There is a reason they call me the Chosen One."

She squeezed him tightly. "Maybe, when you're fully healed, but now? I can't bear it, I just can't! If I release you, they'll put you on the front and Force or not you'll be slaughtered! I can't do it! I can't, I won't let them take you away from me."

"Shh." He gently stroked her hair, his arms holding her tightly, his lips placing gentle kisses on the crown of her head. His voice was soft, a comforting murmur. "I'm not going anywhere, my love."

She froze, certain she misheard him. "What?"

"I'm not going anywhere." He tilted her head back, gently wiping away the tears that had escaped her eyes. "I promise."

"Not that, what did you call me?" She searched his gaze, seeing the instant vulnerability her question brought; the guarded reaction.

"It's an endearment."

"Did you mean it?"

She could feel the way her question affected him. She saw the way his eyes flickered, the way they seemed to dart all over her face, viewing her all at once. The tightening in his arms, the way her held her. Finally his eyes came back to meet hers, and he spoke softly, with conviction. "I shouldn't, but yes." He smiled gently, brushing her hair out of her face. "I love you, Padmé; I always have."

"Oh, Anakin." She shifted her grip, sliding her arms up his chest and around his neck, hugging him tightly as she burst into tears. She wanted to say the words back to him, could feel his uncertainty at her reaction. She wanted more than anything to be able to love him freely, to give him what he wanted from her; to give him everything.

"Padmé?"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry." She wiped her eyes on her sleeve, unable to release her grip on him, unable to stem the flow of grateful but desolate tears that slid down her face. Her feelings were still new enough, still raw enough that she was almost blinded by them. Yet reality and rational thinking still intruded. Despite their feelings, they'd never be able to act on them. Not beyond stolen kisses and secret rendezvous. What kind of a life was in store for them, what would it solve if he knew she felt the same way?

"Don't be sorry, but don't leave me out here by myself. If you feel the same, tell me." She heard the need, the uncertainty in his tone. "Please?"

"Anakin..." She felt more tears trickle down her cheeks and made her decision. No matter what, he deserved to know. He deserved to know he wasn't yearning for her without being missed in return. He deserved to know that she loved him. "My Anakin... I shouldn't love you either, but I do."

She was crushed tightly to his chest, swore she heard the ragged beginnings of a sob against her neck as he held her. They trembled together, neither willing to let go, neither willing to end the closeness of the moment.

It was Padmé who finally, after long minutes, released him. She knew loving him was a bad idea, she knew staying with him like this was a bad idea but she didn't care. "I should go."

"Please stay."

"I can't, Anakin."

"Why not?" He released her reluctantly until she was standing on her own two feet again, at arm's length with their fingers entwined.

“You know why not. If I stay it will only be more difficult for both of us over the next few weeks.”

He squeezed her hands. “And if you don’t stay, will it be any different? Stay or go, we’ve uncovered a gundark’s nest now.”

“I know.” She took a deep breath, gently unraveling their fingers. “Anakin... I’m going to be your Doctor until you’re healthy. Can you promise me that until then you won’t give the council any cause to suspect... to think...” she faltered.

“Something they shouldn’t?” He smiled a half-smile. “I can manage. Can you?”

She nodded. “I can. Providing you behave yourself. No more stolen kisses, no more...” She waved at the bed, her cheeks warming. “Seduction attempts.”

He smiled charmingly. “My lady, if I’d intended to seduce you, I wouldn’t have stopped. No, Padmé, I won’t try to seduce you.” His tone changed, to one of certainty, velvety soft, caressing even; it sent shivers of anticipation down her spine as she realized he spoke of intention and promise. ‘When you come to me it will be willing and free. Not shackled to me by your obligations as my Doctor, conflicted with the knowledge that it’s wrong because of your oaths.’ He gently pushed a lock of hair around her ear, caressing the line of her jaw with his thumb. “I promise you; there will be no barriers, no half-truths and no doubts when I make you mine.”

Her breath caught, making her words a breathless whisper. “And until then?”

His hand dropped and he smiled boyishly, the confident, caressing tone disappearing. “I behave myself. Though I can’t promise I’ll be able to resist a quick kiss or two.”

She laughed softly. “That’s my Anakin. Always the Rogue.”

“Your Anakin.” He returned her soft smile, his eyes glittering. “I like that. And just so you know, Obi-Wan was only teasing me about my reputation with the ladies; none of them will ever hold a candle to you.”

“Flatterer.” But she could see he was sincere. “But I think I’d better go. Tomorrow I’ll have to be back on duty, and probably argue my case with the Jedi Masters about keeping you longer. You’re a much sought after Jedi.”

He grinned. “I *am* the Chosen One.”

“For now all, you’ve been chosen for is captivity until you’re healed. You’d better practice or they’ll accuse me of malpractice.”

“I wouldn’t want that.” He tugged on her hands, and she went willingly into his arms for a brief embrace. “Sleep well, Angel. I look forward to tomorrow.”

“Me too.”

Padmé didn’t think as she left his room. She just felt. Her body felt warm, but tense in anticipation of what would come in the following days. She pushed the feelings deep, trying to bury them, to ignore them. Tomorrow she would be Anakin’s doctor again. Tomorrow she would have to be professional, and likely explain her actions to the Jedi council. She couldn’t afford to let her feelings for Anakin mar her diagnosis of his progress.

When he was ready she was going to have to let him go. And that would be one of the hardest things she'd ever done.

But, until that moment came, she intended to fight for the time he needed to heal. Anything less was unacceptable.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14

“Doctor Naberrie?”

Padmé didn’t look up from the datapad in her hand as she continued writing her notes. “Yes, Mik?”

“Uh...” Mik paused nervously. “There’s someone here to see you.”

“There are lots of people here to see me, Mik; they’re called patients.”

“A patient I am not, Doctor Naberrie.”

Padmé’s head came up with a snap at the mild reproof in the tone. “Master Yoda! What an unexpected surprise.”

“Doubt that, I do.” Yoda’s hover chair was about even with her chest, and his hands were folded serenely in his lap. “Have time, do you?”

Padmé glanced at Mik. “Mik and Lana can cover for me for a few minutes.”

Mik accepted Padmé’s datapad and then darted from the small room that served as Padmé’s make-shift office. Padmé pulled her professionalism around her like a cloak of dignity, turning her full attention to Yoda. She felt confident she was projecting none of the nervousness she felt in the fluttering of her stomach. “What can I do for you, Master Yoda? I presume this is not a social call.”

“Concerned I am, at your refusal to allow Skywalker’s release.” Yoda was blunt, straight to the point. “Need him we do.”

“As a corpse or an able-bodied Jedi?”

Yoda remained silent, not dignifying her mild question with an answer.

“That’s what I thought.” Padmé pushed off the edge of her ‘desk’ where she’d been leaning and motioned for him to precede her. “If you’d care to walk with me, Master Yoda, I’ve a few things to show you.”

Yoda maneuvered his seat into the hallway, matching her pace easily as she headed for the remaining Jedi in her care. “Disturbed I am by the report of Master Kenobi, Doctor.” Yoda informed her as she walked, keeping pace. “Question, I do, the wisdom of Skywalker remaining in your care.”

“Why?” Padmé held a door for the diminutive Jedi. “Have I done anything with his care that makes you question my abilities or intentions as they apply to his continued health and well-being? Have I done anything that indicates I’m incapable of making a diagnosis with regard to the health of my patients?”

“No.” Yoda’s answer seemed reluctant to her ears, almost as if he’d hoped he could say otherwise.

“I’d hate to think I had.” Padmé pulled back the first of five curtains in the Jedi ward to reveal a heavily bandage-swabbed blue skinned Twi’lek. “I believe you know Jedi Knight Alaya Secura, Master Yoda. She was injured on the line just this morning with severe burns and deep incisions from shrapnel. We spent the better part of the morning doing surgery and she will be put into Bacta very shortly to assist with the healing. Your Jedi Healers make trips when the Jedi are injured to ensure they’re placed in trances. As you can see, she’s only unconscious. Once she’s in her healing trance, we’ll place her in bacta for a day or two. She’ll be good as new.”

“Impressed am I, Doctor Nabberrie, that you work so well with the Jedi.”

She barely looked at him. “Jedi have always been important in my life, Master Yoda. It would be unthinkable for me to help them in anything less than to the best of my ability. The Jedi did, after all, come to my aid in the darkest hours of my planet.”

“Understand, I do. And Skywalker?”

Padmé let the sheet go and turned Yoda towards the door. “Anakin’s injuries are special. Because he’s technically not injured in a way any of my staff can help with, he has his own room on the edge of the medical ward.”

“Special treatment he receives?”

“A little.” That was about as much of a concession she would give. “Anakin’s in the healing phases of his injury. First, we had to make sure that he would survive beyond the initial injury and subsequent trauma caused by reattachment. After his arm was amputated the second time, something I’m still not pleased with I assure you, we applied a more direct route. Anakin also chose to build his own replacement arm, so that’s played a part in his recovery. More mentally than physically, but essential none-the-less.”

She paused outside Anakin’s room, turning to meet Yoda’s gaze. “He’s had his arm on for several days now and, to my knowledge, has not stopped tinkering with the mechanics. That said, Anakin’s right arm is still new enough that his control over it is sporadic at best.”

“Hmmm.” Yoda stroked his chin thoughtfully. “See him, I may?”

Padmé had the strangest compulsion to tell him no; Anakin was hers! “Of course.” She fought down on the temptation, nodding as she knocked on the door. “Anakin, it’s Padmé. You have a visitor.”

The door slid open and Anakin met them at the door. He was dressed, thankful, in his tunic and leggings and no longer wearing the revealing shorts supplied by her staff. “Padmé.” His smile was delighted, though he froze for just a half second as he noticed his second visitor. “Master Yoda!”

“Good, you look, Knight Skywalker.”

“Better than when you last saw me.” Anakin’s agreement was easy as he stepped back, motioning for them to come in. “It’s not much, Master, but it’s home for now.”

Yoda entered, with Padmé following behind, her gaze locking with Anakin's. She saw he knew exactly how crucial this meeting was; a test to see if they could fool him. To see if their secret was capable of being kept from the most powerful of the Jedi. His eyes sparkled for just a moment at the challenge before he turned back to the old Master. "Come for my daily check up, Doc?"

"Today I'm playing tour guide."

"Let me stop you, do not." Yoda insisted politely. "How feel you, Anakin?"

"Weak." Anakin's admission was accompanied by a slight smile as he sat on the bed and began undoing his tunic. His movements with his right arm were still slow and deliberate as he attempted to undo the buttons. His metallic fingers twitched at odd times, and, while his eyes narrowed in frustration, he managed to laugh at himself. "I'm afraid I'm still mastering the small things."

"See this, I do. Your time, take."

"I'd hate to keep you Master, I'm sure you have more important things to do. Doctor, could you give me a hand with this?"

Padmé met his gaze, noting the challenge, and issued one of her own. "Master Yoda has instructed you to take your time, Anakin. Besides, these are the things you'll need to prove you can do naturally before you're cleared for duty again."

"Heartless woman." Anakin went back to undoing the buttons.

They came free slowly, and Padmé had to look elsewhere as his shirt fell open inch by inch. His slow, unintentionally sensuous undressing was playing havoc with her senses at a time she couldn't afford to lose her professionalism. "Master Yoda, while we wait for Anakin to... disrobe, were there any other questions you had about his treatments or recovery?"

"Said, you did, he must be natural. Require how much time, do you?"

"That depends entirely on Anakin and how devoted he is to taking the time to relearn the skills his arm and brain don't yet know."

"Hmm." Yoda turned back to Anakin. "Slow you are, Skywalker."

"I'm going as fast as I can, Master." Anakin's annoyance was clear in his voice and the flash in his eyes as he glanced up at Yoda. "I thought Jedi were supposed to be patient."

"Patient I am. Learn patience yourself, you should."

"There." Anakin undid the last button and shrugged out of his tunic. "And I have patience, I just don't like knowing I have to take things slow."

"Reckless are you, young Skywalker." Yoda's hover chair moved forward as he examined the harness and connections that held Anakin's arm in place. His gimmer stick reached out to gently prod the harness over Anakin's shoulder. "Need this, do you?"

Anakin shrugged. "I figured it would be a good idea until I'm able to use the arm naturally; it'll save the upper arm muscles from becoming fatigued as fast as they'd normally be."

“Wise, I think it is not.”

“Respectfully, Master, you’re not its inventor.” Anakin looked beyond Yoda to Padmé. “Ready when you are, Doc.”

Padmé’s mouth went dry. He’d said the words as a tease, a deliberate mimic of the intentions shown in his gaze. She glared at him briefly, cautionary; he needed to behave himself lest Yoda catch on. “It yo—” she cleared her throat, and tried again. “If you’ll dip your arm, Anakin.”

He did as she asked as Padmé stepped to his side and examined the tissues where his arm connected to his flesh. She gently prodded the area, making sure there were no signs of infection. There was slight swelling, indicating he’d been using his arm a lot, and she glanced up at him. “Over doing it, Anakin?”

He blinked, feigning innocence. “I don’t know what you mean, Doctor; I’ve only been doing my exercises. How could I possibly be overdoing it; you and your nurses are the only guests I’m allowed on a daily basis.”

Their gazes locked and an image of their previous evening together flashed through Padmé’s mind. He’d been over using it alright, just not in a way she could call him on. She managed to keep the flush of embarrassment off her face by a force of will alone. “It would seem that the exercises we’ve given you are being done overzealously. Cut your routine in half until the swelling fades. We also need to schedule you for surgery.”

“Surgery?” There was no feigning Anakin’s surprise. “What for?”

She smiled faintly, a part of her pleased she could still surprise him even if it was unpleasantly. “You didn’t honestly think your arm would remain detachable, did you?”

“I... uh...” He blush, managing a self-deprecating grin. “To be honest I hadn’t really known about this side of injuries until I was put in your capable hands.”

“Your knowledge we must expand, Skywalker.”

Padmé managed not to jump at Yoda’s soft reprimand. She’d almost forgotten he was there. She swallowed, taking a deep breath. “It’s not something most people think about, Master Yoda. Why would you? Jedi train to believe that the Force will guide them and they trust in it. Mostly, when things go wrong, a Jedi dies.”

“Lucky young Skywalker is.” Yoda’s tone held reluctant approval. “Time he needs to heal; time he will be given. What recommend you, Doctor Naberrie?”

Padmé shrugged. “He’s at least two weeks away, Master Yoda, probably closer to twice that. Though, if you’d like, I can send you daily updates on his progress.”

“Necessary, that will not be. When ready he is, return to us he will. Begin the search by himself, Obi-Wan will.”

“And if he finds a monster?” Anakin cast a side-long look at Padmé, clearly uncomfortable with his oldest friend being sent on such a mission alone.

“Report to us, he does.” Yoda poked Anakin gently in the good shoulder with his gimmer stick. “Heal. When ready are you, discuss our options we will.”

“Thank you, Master Yoda.”

Padmé continued her examination as they spoke.

“My leave I will take, Doctor Naberrie. Understand now, I do, the reason for your orders. Your patient Skywalker will remain.”

“Thank you, Master Yoda.”

“May the Force be with you, Anakin.” Yoda inclined his head to the younger Jedi. “Doctor.”

Padmé watched as the little seat pattered silently out of the room, the door closing behind it with a soft click. She expelled a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding.

Anakin slanted an amused look at her. “Don’t tell me you were worried, Doc.”

She grinned, shrugging, before returning to his arm and the examination of the inflamed tissue. “A little. I don’t like the look of your arm, Anakin. We should probably give it a rest for the rest of the day.”

“It doesn’t hurt.”

“That’s not the point.” She lightly touched an area that was connected to his arm’s sensors and they twitched. “These shouldn’t be as sensitive to the touch as they are; that can be dangerous. I’m disconnecting your arm.”

“But—”

Her head came up and she met his gaze. “No buts, Anakin. I’d rather err on the side of caution than do permanent damage to the stump. Besides, once the swelling goes down, we’ll see to permanently, surgically, attaching your creation so you can lose the harness.”

“And you didn’t mention it ’til now because...?”

She grinned. “Men are babies when it comes to expected surgeries.” She unhooked the sensors and released the pressure on his arm, taking the weight of the metal in her arms as she pulled the harness off his shoulder.

Anakin couldn’t suppress a hiss of pain as the suction released and his replacement arm dropped from the stump. It was as much from the release against the swollen flesh as losing his arm once more, even for a short period of time.

Padmé placed the arm on a tray by the bed and turned back to him, understanding and compassion swelling her heart. “I’m sorry, Anakin. I wish there was another way, but it’s only for today.”

He looked mournfully at the now-bare stump of his right arm and reached for his tunic.

Padmé intercepted his hand, twining their fingers together briefly. “I don’t...” His gaze slowly met his and she could see the pain in his gaze. She lifted her other hand to cup his face, her words barely a whisper. “I don’t love you less because of an arm, Anakin.”

His fingers spasmed on hers and he smiled for her. “Thanks, Padmé. You’d better go, or I might be tempted to follow up on a threat or two.” He looked pointedly at her lab coat.

She smiled, stepping away. "I'll send Lana down with something to help the arm. Now rest; Doctor's orders."

He settled back on his bed, stretching out obediently on the bunk and looked at her expectantly. "No goodnight kiss?"

She laughed. "You're incorrigible; goodnight Anakin. I'll see you in a few hours when my shift is over."

"Until then." He closed his eyes. "Good night Angel."

She stepped from his room. It wasn't technically night, but he did need his rest. She tracked Lana down and instructed her as to what was needed to doctor Anakin's wounds. She continued her rounds where she'd left off at Yoda's intrusion, humming a soft tune as she went about her duties. She had several long, full hours before she was able to go back and see Anakin and she intended to catch up on those things she'd been neglecting the last few days.

She would have plenty of time when she was done to check on him and his arm. Until then she firmly planted her focus where it belonged.

Anakin was still sleeping when Padmé peaked in at the end of her shift. His hair fell boyishly across his forehead, messy about his head, and in stark contrast to the white of his pillow. The lights were dim, but she had no trouble seeing him. He'd foregone a sheet and slept in his breeches; which was something. Her lips twisted into a soft, affectionate smile.

She hadn't realized the predator could be so innocently cute.

She stepped quietly into the room and moved with silent steps to his bed side, soaking in his presence as a flower basks in sunlight. She simply watched him. The even rise and fall of his bare chest, the slight fluttering of his lashed; the way his breath hitched every so often as if he were dreaming something unpleasant that quickly passed. She reached out and gently brushed his bangs from his brow, unable to resist the temptation.

Anakin's head turned into the faint whisper of a touch, and he sighed her name so softly, so reverently, that if she'd doubted his feelings before, she would never have been able to doubt them now. He knew she was there. Only unconsciously, perhaps, but he certainly knew her touch.

She shook her head, amused at her own wandering thoughts, and moved to the right side of his bed where she could examine his swollen tissues. She noted they looked healthier, the hours without the strain of the new arm having done wonders for the color. It was light pink again, no longer the angry, swollen red, and she gently touched it.

Anakin shifted in his sleep, murmuring something she didn't quite make out, and she leaned in closer. His brow was puckered, indicating he wasn't dreaming anything pleasant and she resisted the urge to smooth the lines. He fell silent again, his breath feathering across her cheek as she held her breath in the hope he would speak again.

He didn't, and after several long moments she straightened and silently let herself breathe again. Whatever had been bothering him passed and his brow smoothed out once more. He sighed in his sleep, turning his head away and Padmé gasped softly.

At the base of his skull, underneath that sinful wealth of soft hair, was a vicious looking scar. Neatly healed, but something her trained eye couldn't miss. She reached out, gently tracing the faint line of puckered tissue. Why hadn't his immersion in bacta caused the scar to fade? She frowned, leaning closer for a better look, and caught the faint sheen of something under his skin. An implant of some kind?

Her gaze darted to his face as she checked to make sure he was still sound asleep and her fingers gently traced over the line of the scar once again. She hadn't had much of a chance to examine anything beyond his arm when treating him the first time and, if she was honest, she hadn't been concerned beyond a cursory exam since he'd had no other major injuries.

Where had he not only acquired such a nasty scar, but one that had been left to heal over something that had been stuck in his neck? And what inept physician had allowed such a dangerous area to be left untouched and for what reason? It was disturbing without his medical records; and it wasn't really any of her business. Anakin was fine, in perfect health, and due to undergo surgery to graft his arm to the bone in two days time, making his attachment permanent. A scar on the back on his head, no matter how vicious, didn't interfere with his abilities. She knew that first hand.

His head turned, hiding the scar from view, and Padmé attempted to put it out of her mind, but sleepy, baby blue orbs caught her in their grasp. "Hi."

"Hi yourself." She smiled softly at him. "Tired?"

He yawned, nodding. "My doctor's a witch; keeps me up for all hours at night."

She chuckled softly. "I think you're dreaming."

He pushed himself up, never breaking away from her gaze. "Maybe. But it'll be reality one day; I think it's inevitable."

"Anakin."

"I know, I promised I'd be good." He yawned again and scratched his head before looking pointedly at his mechanical arm. "Can I have my arm back yet? I promise I'll take it easy."

"You sound like some of the children I treat when they ask for candy."

He grinned boyishly. "Lucky kids."

"They rarely get it."

He shrugged. "They're still lucky to have someone as caring and dedicated as you to look after them. You'd make a wonderful mother."

She blushed. "Anakin."

"Just a statement of fact, Padmé. Nothing more. Though, if you want children..."

She swatted him lightly with the datapad. "You're horrible. We haven't even talked about marriage and you're already jumping to children?"

"I'm planning ahead for when you say yes." His face became serious. "You will say yes, won't you?"

“To what?” She arched an eyebrow at him. “I haven’t been asked a question yet.”

He grasped her hand, gently running his thumb over the back of it in what was becoming a familiar, intimate gesture. “When I ask you to marry me.”

“Anakin...”

He lifted her hand to his lips and brushed a soft kiss over her knuckles. “The look on your face is all the answer I need. But,” he let her hand go and settled back. “I promised my Doctor I’d be good and good I shall be. When she’s done playing Doctor, maybe I can have the lady whose stolen my heart back.”

“You’re incorrigible.”

“But you love me anyway.”

“Doctor’s aren’t allowed to love.”

“I find that hard to believe; I think it’s a part of your job description.”

She laughed lightly. “You may be right, but loving a patient only makes it that much more difficult to let them go.”

A shadow crossed his features. “You really meant what you said to Master Yoda today, didn’t you?”

“Yes, Anakin.” She brushed his hair back from his face. “Your recovery time will be entirely up to your own schedule. I find myself hoping you’ll take it slow, but I know you won’t. You’re going to push yourself and suffer set backs, but I have no doubt you’ll be out helping Obi-Wan save the galaxy before the end of next week.”

“And if I promise to take it slow?”

She laughed softly. “You won’t. I saw the look on your face when you thought of Obi-Wan searching for that rumored monster alone. You’d join him right now if I’d clear you for it.”

“I’d rather be here with you, pretty lady.”

“Flatterer. It’s a nice thought, but you know as well as I do you’d never forgive yourself if something happened to Obi-Wan.”

“True.” He let out a sigh. “I’d still rather be here with you.”

She didn’t reply; didn’t have to. “Are you ready to have your arm back?”

He nodded eagerly.

“Then use those Jedi ways of yours and give me a hand with it.”

Anakin obliged, spreading his fingers towards the arm and lifting it easily from the table to where she was. She grinned and attached it in place, able to use both hands as Anakin held it steady. Within moments he had it connected once more and let out a sigh of relief. “I can’t believe you had me take it off, Padmé.”

“You’re lucky that’s all I had to-ahhh!”

She shrieked, laughing, as he caught her about the waist, turning to pull her against him with a grin. "I'm not the only incorrigible one, Doc." He bent his head to place a gentle kiss on the column of her neck, and there was disguising his approval when her head fell back for his touch.

"Anakin..."

"I know." He nibbled on the soft flesh of her throat, sucking gently on the pulse point where her jaw met her neck before continuing to trace the smooth column with his lips. His hands were splayed across her back, holding her tenderly as his lips explored. "Do you know what you do to me, Padmé?"

She gasped as he brushed his teeth gently over her shoulder, nipping softly. "Anakin!"

"Yes, love?"

She closed her eyes at his soft, almost reverent words, feeling her lab coat slowly being worked off her shoulders. He teasingly tugged with his teeth until he revealed the no-nonsense shirt with short sleeves under the coat. She shuddered in his grasp as his lips moved lower, tracing the line of her collar down to her collar bone. She felt like jelly in his grasp, unable to command her own body. Completely at his mercy.

What had she been saying? Saying? Oh right, objecting. Why was she objecting?

She had no idea.

She pulled her head upright with a supreme forced of will, somewhere registering that her lab coat was pulled down only about the shoulders, trapping her arms at her sides. But she didn't care as she met Anakin's smoldering gaze. "Wha... what was I...?"

He chuckled softly, darting his tongue into the dip at the base of her collar bone as she watched. "I think you were going to tell me to behave."

She shivered. "Behave?"

He nodded. "I promised. I really should behave, but misbehaving is so much more fun."

She made to move her arms and frowned, as if realizing for the first time that she was his captive. She looked at the offending lab coat for a moment before she registered exactly what it was they were doing. Anakin was sitting on his bed, she braced against his chest and almost spread across his lap again. She tried to move her arms, to force the coat upwards, but Anakin stilled her with a touch of his hand.

"Allow me." He straightened her clothing with easy, almost fluid movements, never taking his gaze from hers.

"You did promise to behave."

"I know." He didn't sound contrite in the least.

She didn't move away, couldn't, as she searched his gaze. "Was that one of those stolen kisses you promised me, Jedi?"

"Maybe." He grinned roguishly, gently cupping her face with his left hand for a moment. He ran his thumb over her slightly swollen lips. "Do you mind?"

She shook her head and smiled, kissing the tip of his thumb. “Not in the least. I can’t stay though; I’m back on duty for the next while.”

“I know.” He used the pressure of his fingers to draw her unresistingly closer, bending his head. “Is it wrong of me to want another of those kisses, Padmé?”

Her eyes fluttered closed as his lips brushed softly across hers once, then twice before stopping to hover expectantly over hers. “Padmé?”

“Kiss me, Anakin.”

He wasn’t about to object when she begged him so sweetly.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15

Anakin's surgery went without incident resulting in a tight fit for both bone and arm. Needless to say, Padmé saw an almost instant improvement in his abilities — once she permitted him to try. She was very proud of his accomplishments, noting that his progress was gaining speed as he diligently applied himself to his re-training.

She spent all of her extra time with him. She ate her dinners with him, saw him first thing, and last, in the days. She enjoyed the stolen kisses, the soft caresses. She simply enjoyed being a woman in love with a handsome young man.

And while they had their scares; Obi-Wan almost walking in on them a second time, their relationship continued to grow, and their bond strengthened. Padmé worked tirelessly towards Anakin's recovery, as much for him as for her. She didn't want to let him go, and while tempted to slow his recovery process, knew she would enjoy his company whenever she could. It was simply enough to know he was recovering, and she admired him, loved him, more every day.

An unexpected comm. call brought Padmé back to reality with a bruising bang...

"You cannot be serious."

"Unfortunately, I am." Chancellor Palpatine assured her, his expression troubled over the communication line. "Our good Doctor was quite adamant and he has the ear of some very highly placed individuals in your field. This has become an internal matter for the Medical Profession to determine."

"Then why have you contacted me?"

Palpatine's smile was sympathetic. "I did endorse your current position; I can't help but feel responsible for this. So you are aware, I was not asked to contact you, my dear. I felt it was my duty to inform you before your official orders come through."

"To give me a chance to adjust before they revoke my license and take me into custody?" Padmé almost spat the words before holding her hand up to forestall any response he would have made. "I'm not angry with you Chancellor. It just appears my colleagues don't understand that people are dying and we're in the middle of a war. Who will be replacing me?"

"I'm afraid I don't have that information, Padmé. I am truly sorry to see it come to this."

"Me too. Thank you for the warning Chancellor. I had best see that my staff is made aware before my official orders revoke all my privileges."

The Chancellor inclined his head. "Good luck, Doctor."

She closed off the comm. call with the vicious stab of one fingers, her blood boiling as she silently fumed. Helkor. The slimy son of a Hutt had returned to Coruscant and begun the legal

proceedings for malpractice and dismissal without case; against her! She pushed away from the comm. station with an irritable gesture. Low life, no good, underhanded, nerf loving, sarlac eating Helkor!

“Doctor, I have those figures you...” Mik knocked on the door and paused, doing a double take. “Are you alright?”

“Fine Mik. You have the statistics I asked for?”

“Right here.” She held out the datapad. “You’re sure you’re alright? You look like you just swallowed something foul tasting.”

“I did.” Padmé smiled sourly. “I’ll be leaving the detachment for Coruscant within the next few days, Mik. I’ve been recalled.”

Mik’s eyes widened. “What? But... you’re needed here!”

“And Doctor can do what I’ve been doing, and, to be frank, with only two amputations from the fighting, my skills are better used elsewhere.”

“Who’s going to replace you?”

“I haven’t got my official orders yet, so I don’t have all the answers. All I know is that I’ve been recalled — to face charges.”

“Charges!” Mik’s tone became indignant. “For what? Caring too much?”

Padmé’s lips twisted into a reluctant smile. “Malpractice and dismissal without cause. Helkor’s filed the charges.”

“Helkor!” Mik’s eyes blazed. “Why, they could ask any of the staff and find out how he almost killed Jedi Skywalker, or how he deliberately altered the mixes in the bacta tanks so they wouldn’t heal the Jedi! The charges are unfounded!”

Padmé placed her hands on the young nurse’s shoulders, grateful for the show of support. “I don’t need an advocate, Mik, but I will need evidence and I don’t have much time to gather it. Can you help me?”

“Of course! I still have the holo records of Helkor’s mechanisms in the bacta ward.”

“Mementos?”

“Blackmail.” Mik’s tone was grim. ‘In case he ever tried to come back. I think you might need it more than I do.’ She paused, a sudden thought crossing her mind. “What about Anakin? Do they realize you’re leaving at a crucial junction of his healing process?”

“I don’t think they care, Mik.” Padmé gently squeezed her shoulders gratefully before letting her go. “Besides, Anakin’s almost ready to return to the field. His injuries are healed, his coordination improves daily and he’s determined to join Obi-Wan in hunting that Jedi killer.”

Mik sighed, her anger draining away. “Can we do anything to help you, Doctor? Something that would help keep you here?”

"I appreciate the offer, Mik, but I don't think there's anything you can do. The Chancellor himself contacted me to express his concern over the matter. I will simply have to return to Coruscant to face the trial and prove my innocence."

"Anakin won't like it."

Padmé arched her eyebrows at her assistant. "What makes you say that?"

Mik grinned. "Surely you see the way he looks at you, Padmé. You'd have to be blind not to notice he's smitten with you."

Alarm shot through Padmé, followed by a cold, eerie feeling. "Have you told anyone else about this, Mik?"

"Who'd believe me?" She grinned. "Seriously, you never knew? Wow. Well, I guess if he's never tried anything."

"Mik."

Mik threw her hands up. "I know, I know. I'm heading back to my rotation. Should I get Lana to finish up her collections?"

"You'll need to test the samples you collect, so make sure she's careful with them. If the clones are starting to deteriorate at a faster pace than we expected, we need to know about it."

"Even if you won't be here?"

"Especially if I won't be here." Padmé shooed her away. "Off with you. I have things to accomplish before my orders find their way to me."

"Disturbing this is, Doctor." Yoda told her seriously. "Reason they have to believe Helkor?"

"I don't know what he's told them, Master Yoda." Padmé's expression was grim. "Honestly, he could have said anything and they'd have to investigate. The fact that I'm only hearing about it now is a bit suspicious."

"Agree, I do. Remove your expertise, perhaps the goal?"

"Possibly." Her agreement was reluctant. "But I don't think that's the case. Something tells me this is aimed at the Jedi; not me."

"On Helkor's previous actions base you your feeling?"

"Partially. It's just too convenient. I've made no secret to the fact I'm treating Anakin Skywalker, the Chosen One of the Jedi. I think removing me from his treatment at such a late stage is meant to destabilize him. To make him doubt his abilities and recovery."

"Recovered, is he?"

"Almost." Padmé allowed herself to smile. "Anakin is most determined not to miss out on any fun he and Master Kenobi can get into."

"Understand I do." Yoda's response was dry. "How much time require you, Doctor?"

"I'd love to have another week, Master Yoda, but it's not going to happen. I've a feeling my orders are due in today or tomorrow. Once I receive them I will have to turn myself over to the troopers in the infirmary and be escorted back to Coruscant."

"Alone? Unwise."

"But necessary." Padmé's assurance was far more confident than she felt. "My only concern is that if this is a plot to distance me from the Jedi, the plot must somehow include my expertise."

Yoda stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Agree with you, I do. Most helpful you have been. Of help, can the Jedi be?"

"Only if they call witnesses, Master Yoda. Forgive me, but I need to cut this transmission short. I don't know how long I have and I must see that my patients are comfortable before I'm called away, possibly permanently."

"May the Force be with you, Doctor Naberrie."

"And you, Master Yoda." She shut off the comm. and her shoulders slumped. She was exhausted, worn down from the accusations, of which she didn't yet have the official transcript. She rubbed her forehead, checking the chrono on the wall by her bed. Her shift was over and Anakin would be wondering where she was.

She shrugged out of her lab coat, hanging it on the back of her chair before straightening her sweater. She stepped back into her shoes and headed for the infirmary. She had to speak with Mik and Lana before she went to see Anakin.

"They're *what*?"

Padmé had known he wasn't going to stay sitting the moment the words left her mouth. Anakin had jumped to his feet in surprise and was now staring at her incredulously. She reached out one hand to grasp his arm just at the elbow joint. "I'm as shocked as you are, but I don't have a choice in this."

"You can't be thinking about going back to Coruscant without fighting this?"

"I don't have a choice." She repeated the words deliberately. "I can't fight the allegations from here, not while I'm still practicing and have my focus elsewhere. The chance of losing my license without even realizing it would be too great. Helkor's accusations are unfounded, but I can't prove my innocence if I don't face him at the tribunal."

"You're not going to be arrested are you?" His tone was alarmed as he turned to face her, taking her in his arms as he searched her face worriedly. "Be put in some hell-hole of a prison?"

She smiled faintly. "No, Anakin. When a Doctor is revoked temporarily of their license it's a cautionary measure to prevent them from practicing. I'll be arrested, yes, but part of that arrest will be a confinement to quarters for the duration of the trip home."

"And what about your patients here?"

“Mik and Lana have learned everything extremely well. They may not be real Doctors, but they’re capable of dealing with all of the battle wounds we’ve seen so far; except ones like yours. I don’t know yet if they’re going to replace me, but I do know I’ll be filing counter-charges against Helkor once I get to Coruscant.”

“What about me — about us?” His blue eyes were pained, full of sadness.

“I’m releasing you back to the Jedi, Anakin.” She reached up to gently cup his face with one hand. “I can’t have you stay here and risk having another doctor like Helkor try to mangle your recovery. You’re days away from being completely battle ready. You’ve been into the simulators; all that’s left is a mock combat with another Jedi.”

“And making you dinner.”

She blinked back sudden tears, laughing softly. “And making me dinner. I don’t want to go, Anakin, but I have to. Please, try to understand?”

He brushed her hair gently away from her face, before running his hands lightly up and down her upper arms. “I’ll miss you, Padmé. I can’t even imagine being out here knowing that you’re not waiting on the medical frigate in case something goes seriously wrong. I can’t imagine going back into action knowing that you won’t be waiting to see me when I’m done.” He pulled her closer, wrapping his arms about her and gently bringing her head to his chest. “I’ll worry about you every minute you’re back on Coruscant. About the uncertainty you’ll face, the censure and the lies, knowing you did nothing wrong.”

“But I have.” Her voice was soft, her throat aching. “I fell in love with you, Anakin.”

He chuckled softly, kissing the crown of her head. “There’s nothing wrong with that, it’s just the wrong set of circumstances. On the bright side, I’ll no longer be your patient.”

She laughed softly, pulling her head back to look up at him. “There is that. Will you come see me when you return to the core?”

He nodded. “Nothing could keep me away. I love you.”

“I love you too, Anakin.” She tilted her head and barely managed to suppress a sob as he gently kissed her. She kissed him back, knowing she trembled, and unable to suppress it.

The knock at the door had her tearing herself away from his arms, staring at him with tearful eyes as she felt her heart sink. The door slid open a moment later to reveal four armed guards but Padmé couldn’t look at them. Her gaze remained locked with Anakin’s as they stepped into the room.

“Doctor Naberrie. On behalf of the Medical Syndicate, you’re under arrest for pending charges for malpractice and dismissal without cause.”

Padmé watched as Anakin’s intention to stop them flared to life in his gaze. She lunged for him. “No, Anakin!”

He was brought up short, his lightsaber clattering to the ground in mid air just a breath away from his hand. “The charges are false; they shouldn’t take you away in chains!”

She smiled. “I appreciate your concern, but I knew this was coming. Don’t be surprised if I call you as a witness before the tribunal.”

“Doctor Naberrie, my orders are to take you into custody immediately.”

She swallowed hard. “I understand captain. Please excuse Jedi Skywalker. He was just gathering his things to return to the Jedi’s barracks.” She looked at him pointedly, her gaze hard, unyielding, even as her heart was breaking. Anakin wanted to fight for her, to help her resist, but he was going about it all wrong. Her expression softened. “Help me in ways that are necessary, Anakin, not in petty shows of bravado. I’ll see you; maybe sooner than either of us thinks.”

He didn’t respond, but she could read the anguish in his gaze. She turned away, presenting her wrists in case they felt irons were necessary. “Lead on, Captain.”

“You’ll cooperate?”

“I’m innocent; I have no reason not to.”

The Captain motioned for his three officers to form up around her, but didn’t cuff her. “We’ll take you to the awaiting shuttle. This way.”

Padmé straightened her spine as she was led from Anakin’s room and towards the shuttle bay. She didn’t look back, but she could feel his gaze as it followed her. He shadowed them, matching their steps, ensuring her safety from a distance, until she was loaded on the shuttle and the entrance began to close. It was only then, as his gaze left her and she was escorted to her room, that her shoulders lost some of their starch.

She settled onto the bunk that would be her only companion for the trip back to Coruscant and closed her eyes, the tears finally seeping down across her cheeks. She pulled her legs to her chest, wrapped her arms about them and buried her face in her knees.

Later she would be strong; for now she would simply pour her sorrow at leaving Anakin for such an uncertain future into the fabric of her slacks.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16

Padmé stepped down from the transport into the false daylight of Coruscant on the landing pad for the medical transports directly next to her practice. She wasn't chained or bound, though she was escorted by the same four guards that had come to collect her from Anakin's quarters. It had been a long ride as she reflected on the testimony the guards were likely to give. They'd found her in casual clothing in a patient's quarters after her shift had been completed.

Damming evidence in itself despite her chosen professional path.

She was thankful the landing pad and surrounding area was vacant, the time of their landing coinciding with the major surgery slot at the clinic. The guards escorted her to a side passage off the deck and into the back halls of her clinic. They passed no one; and Padmé felt a shiver slide down her spine. She could hear the beeping of the equipment, could smell the familiar antiseptics, but there was none of the atmosphere she'd come to associate with this place. It had lost its familiar feeling and been replaced with a cold, sterile impression. She shivered, unable to help herself, and breathed a soft sigh as they passed down and into the main courtyard, towards her apartment.

The guards closed in around her, shielding her from any gaze that might come her way, as they led her towards the turbo lifts. Once inside, they relaxed their vigilance for a moment, the captain turning his helmeted head her way. She didn't need to see his face to know it held a concerned look. "I'm sorry it's come to this, Doctor."

"Me too, Captain. I hope my replacement is fully briefed on the needs of you and your men."

The helmet gave no emotional response, but she saw it dip ever so slightly. "We'll manage. Are you're aware of the terms of your incarceration while the investigation is being completed?"

"House arrest."

"And you're aware of the consequences if you fail to follow this restriction?"

"It will imply I am guilty and weigh against me at trial." She smiled slightly. "I appreciate your concern, Captain, but I am aware of my rights and restrictions. I am also aware that you will have a guard posted at my door, I will be under video surveillance — but not audio — and I have the right to council. I also have the right to refuse council and prepare my own case. Which I intend to do as any council I would choose would be a Jedi; and there are few on planet."

The turbo lift doors opened and Padmé was escorted out. "And you're aware if you do wish to leave your apartments you must be escorted at all times by an appointed member of the tribunal and report as to your whereabouts?"

“Yes, Captain.”

He palmed open the door to her apartment. “Very well, Doctor. I will take my leave. The Lieutenant,” he motioned to one of his men, “will be here if you need anything. I’ve been asked to inform you that preliminary hearing, with the details of the charges, is two days from now at 08:00.”

“Thank you Captain.” She paused on the threshold of her door. “Am I being permitted visitors?”

“Ask and I will see if they are available to see you.”

“There is a nurse at the clinic in my... in the department in which I specialize. Cordé. Could you pass the message along that I am home and I’d like for her to come and see me?”

The Captain inclined his upper body. “As you wish, Doctor. Good day.”

“Good day, Captain.” She stepped through the door, letting it close behind her and let out a breath. She went directly to the windows, palming open the vents as she walked, and pressing the releases on the balcony covers and taking a deep breath as the fresh air circulated into the apartment.

She hit the window coverings, allowing the sunlight to stream through massive windows and brighten up the room. Only it didn’t. Everything held a slight grayish over tone, one that was very familiar.

Dust. Everywhere.

Padmé looked back at the doorway, and chewed on her lower lip for a moment before making her decision. If Cordé arrived she’d put her friend to work helping her clean up her home. If Cordé wasn’t able to come until later, at least the layers of dust would have been stripped from the fabrics and counter tops. Either way it was a good outlet for her frustrations. Oh, she could have called the maid service and complained that they hadn’t held their end of the contract, but for once, she was glad they hadn’t. She needed a distraction and cleaning wasn’t only distracting, but time consuming. It was also mindless and would give her an outlet to focus her thoughts.

Padmé headed for the kitchenette where her cleaning supplies were kept and got to work.

The door chime hours later had her straightening from wiping down the coffee table in her main room. Her back ached, her fingers were wrinkled and she was certain she had dust on her cheeks. She grinned, wiping her fingers on the cloth as she crossed to the door and palmed open the door.

Cordé’s eyes widened in surprise as she took in her friend’s disheveled appearance. “They’ve put you to work already?”

“I needed a distraction.” Padmé’s smile was wide as she motioned her friend in. “And my maid service must have forgotten to up hold its end of the bargain.”

Cordé stepped in and enveloped Padmé in a tight hug as the door closed. “It’s so good to see you! I couldn’t believe it when they broke the news to me this after noon! Are you alright?”

“I’m fine, Cordé.” Padmé laughed, returning the hug. “I’ve missed you too.”

“I’m sorry you were called back on such sordid charges, Padmé. I know they’re not true.”

“Most of them anyway.” Padmé’s smile was semi-secretive and amused. The last few hours had given her a chance to gain some much needed perspective on the charges she would be facing. “How’re the kids?”

“They’re all back in their places at the temple and the ward has been positively empty the last few weeks.”

“And they’ve put you to work in the mundane section?”

Cordé shrugged. “What better way to use my talents than to cater to over-fed-self-absorbed diplomats who think a tummy ache is as bad as losing a limb?”

Padmé grinned. “I see your sense of humor is intact. I hope I didn’t pull you away from anything too pressing.”

Cordé sat on the sofa, waving one hand dismissively. “Nothing any first year intern can’t handle. I came over as soon as the Captain delivered your message.”

“He sure took his time then.” Padmé settled across from her friend. “Have you been following the war?”

Cordé nodded, her eyes hooded. “They did a special on the Jedi a few weeks ago once the fighting began in earnest. There are rumors floating about of the Chancellor being asked to stay in office for the duration of the crisis and, even more disturbing, of being asked to stay on permanently. Apparently he’s not unwilling to take the job indefinitely.”

Padmé felt the first stirrings of alarm and pushed them away. “I’m sure there’s a good reason for the movements of the senate, but, to be petty, I’ve my own problems to worry about without worrying about the rest of the Galaxy.”

Cordé changed the subject with a grin. “Is it true to got to operate on Anakin Skywalker?”

“However did you hear that?”

“He’s made the headlines; the poster boy for the Jedi.”

Padmé laughed softly, picturing *her* Anakin as the Jedi’s public relations stunt. It was easy enough, and, if she couldn’t see him in person, at least his image would be plastered all over the holo net. “I’m sure he’s thrilled with the designation. And yes, I did operate on him. The charges I’m facing now are a part of that whole disaster.”

“Disaster?” Cordé looked surprised. “He’s alive, isn’t he?”

“No thanks to Helkor.” Padmé’s expression turned grin and she rubbed her forehead, unaware she was smearing dust across it. “It’s a long story.”

"I'm not going anywhere." Cordé curled her legs underneath her, getting more comfortable. "I've read it from the tribunal's press release, which goes in print tomorrow by the way; now I want to hear it from you. What happened to bring you all the way back here without a fight?"

And so Padmé began her story.

Cordé interrupted angrily as Padmé came to the morning when she'd awoken to Anakin's second amputation and continued deterioration in the bacta. "And Helkor was letting it happen?"

"Mik gave me a copy of the security holos for the treatment room before I left. I took a look and it appears Helkor was deliberately altering the mixes in the tanks containing Jedi." Padmé couldn't keep the anger — and pain — from her voice. "I lost several patients in the days I slept through. All because of Helkor."

"So how is he accusing *you* of malpractice when he's the one who should have been brought up on negligence charges?"

Padmé smiled faintly. "I'm not sure. I don't know how he could possibly construe malpractice from any of my operations or directions. The triage center works like clock work once I found that the clones were more useful than I'd first thought and much more adept at dealing with the mental ramifications of their injuries. I admit to being overly protective of Anakin, but I think I was justified. If I hadn't intervened..." She trailed off, her breath catching as she remembered how close she came to losing him before she'd had the chance to get to know him. Before she'd understood and had the smallest of chances to begin exploring the passion in his kiss.

Cordé patted Padmé's knee. "That's why you're one of the best, Padmé. You *did* intervene and one Anakin Skywalker is alive thanks to your actions. I say you did a damn fine job."

"Oh, but my story doesn't end there." Padmé blushed. "I told you about my first encounter with him as a child, right?"

Cordé shrugged. "You've told me many things, Padmé. I can't remember them all."

"The boy who called me an Angel?"

"That was Jedi Skywalker?"

Padmé nodded. "The one and only. Apparently his crush as a child carried through to his adult years. He didn't wake up initially after we pulled him from the tainted bacta. Not that I blame him, so Obi-Wan suggested I tried asking him nicely to wake up."

"Wait a second, Obi-Wan, as in Obi-Wan Kenobi? The Obi-Wan Kenobi you had a crush on?" Cordé's eyebrows almost hit her hairline. "You've been renewing old acquaintances in my absence!"

Padmé laughed. "Not intentionally, I assure you. And yes, before you ask, he's still as handsome as I thought he was as a kid. I don't have a crush on him anymore though."

“Denial, Padmé.” Cordé’s tease was light. “So what happened? Were you able to wake Anakin?”

“You could say that. His first words were to let me know that I was still an Angel in his eyes.”

Cordé sighed dramatically. “What a charmer!”

“You don’t know the half of it.”

“Then you’re going to tell me.” Cordé pushed to her feet. “But over dinner because I’m famished and I get the feeling I may be here a while.”

“All night even.”

Cordé paused before a sly grin crossed her features. “That much more exciting, is it? Well, if you want to get dinner started, my dear, I’ll go let your dedicated bodyguards know I’ll be here for a long time. If need be, they can do without me at the clinic tomorrow too.”

“Cordé!”

Cordé’s grin turned teasing. “Unless you don’t want my company.”

“I didn’t... I...” She stopped and threw her hands up in defeat. “I’ll start dinner.”

“Something hearty; none of those light weight meals you’re so fond of.”

“Yes, mother.” Padmé’s grumble was sour but good natured. It was good to have her friend back and someone to talk to. Tonight was going to be very interesting.

The sun was rising the next morning as Padmé finished telling Cordé her story.

They’d spoken through dinner, dessert, and then over coffee and tea. Finally, they’d moved to her bedroom and stretched out on the floor, away from prying eyes, as Padmé had begun speaking about Anakin. She told Cordé everything. About his charm, his magnetism. She spoke of his sense of humor and determination. She blushed as she spoke of his seductive, sensuous overtures and her willingness for capitulation.

Cordé simply listened avidly as her friend spoke, letting the words and their implications seep into her brain.

Padmé finally fell silent, her voice raw from so much talking, her gaze far away, clouded with concern as she thought of where Anakin would be at that moment. She sighed, glancing at her friend as she waited for Cordé to say something; anything.

Cordé didn’t speak for long, tense minutes until finally a grin spread across her lips. “It’s about time you found someone! It took you long enough.”

“But—”

“But nothing!” Cordé cut her off, wagging a finger at her friend. “So what if he’s a Jedi? It’ll only add to the relationship. All that mystery and anticipation. I must say I’m impressed you roped him in, a good looking man like that.”

“Cordé!”

Cordé grinned. “He may be taken, but I can still look. What do you think will happen?”

Padmé rolled over onto her back, unable to meet her friend’s gaze any longer. “I don’t know. I was his Doctor, which makes it theoretically unethical for me to have any kind of personal relationship with him.”

“But?”

Padmé sighed. “But... but when he holds me none of that matters. It doesn’t matter that he could be expelled from the Jedi order. It doesn’t matter that I could lose my license to practice. It doesn’t matter that we could be discovered. All that matters is what I *feel* when I’m in his arms. Oh, Cordé, what am I going to do?”

“Nothing.” Cordé’s tone was infused with conviction and a hint of laughter. “Not a thing, Padmé. You said he owes you two dinners. Well, you’re going to accept his invitations and go to dinner with him. You’re going to enjoy yourself and you’re not going to over-think this relationship.”

Padmé’s head turned in surprise to look at her friend. “Even with the consequences?”

“Despite them, yes.” Cordé winked at her. “Anakin Skywalker sounds like the best thing that’s ever happened to you and you’d be a fool to think about trying to forget him.”

“I never said—”

“I know you.” Cordé cut her off with a laugh. “Padmé, you sound like you’re trying to talk yourself into forgetting about him and need permission to go back to living your dull, completely unexciting life.”

“My life isn’t dull!”

“When was the last time you had any excitement outside your job?”

“Uh...” Padmé blushed. “A while ago.”

“Exactly.” Cordé nodded confidently. “I can’t wait to meet him.”

“Cordé!”

The nurse grinned. “You can’t blame a woman for being curious. After all, it’s only taken you ten years to even think about looking at a man, so he must be pretty special.”

“He is.” Padmé sighed. “I miss him. Crazy, isn’t it? I’ve been away from him for less than a couple of days and I miss him. I should be reveling in the opportunity to get caught up on my studies and read those new texts I haven’t had a chance to touch due to being on the medical frigate. I should be preparing my defense to Helkor’s allegations, and my counter suit. But no, here I am moping about a man!”

“It’s a refreshing change.” The tease was light and Cordé made to say something else but was caught off guard by a very large yawn that made her blush. “Oh my, I apologize, Padmé.”

Padmé grinned. “So you are human. I don’t know about you, but I’m exhausted. I’ve a guest room if you’d like.”

“You wouldn’t mind?”

“Why would I?” Padmé pushed herself to her feet. “I’m under house arrest, remember? I’d actually like the company. This place feels so strange after being gone for so long.”

Cordé followed Padmé into the guest room and waited only long enough to bid her friend goodnight before curling up on the bed. Padmé shook her head, smothering a yawn of her own. She felt better having shared her experiences with her most trusted friend. Better, but exhausted.

She headed back for her own room and crawled into bed. She was asleep before her head hit the pillow, her last thought that the blue tones in her walls were the same color as Anakin’s eyes.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17

The next several days followed a similar pattern for Padmé.

Cordé set up shop in her guest room, enlisting the “bodyguards” to escort her to and from her own apartment so she could collect her things. She took last minute leave from the clinic, taking two weeks of the many she was owed, and devoted her time to helping Padmé build her case against Helkor and find evidence to clear her own name.

They were given access to all of the information with relation to the trial and Padmé found herself outraged at the lies Helkor had been spreading. She made a list, which grew daily, of the counter suit she would be filing against the Twi’lek doctor.

Her first appearance in front of the tribunal for the reading of the charges went quickly. They laid out the exact nature of the charges. Among the twelve were some she’d almost laughed at when they were read.

She’d failed to file the proper paperwork immediately after Helkor’s dismissal as to why he’d been dismissed for official record. She’d failed to provide proper instruction to her field personnel with regards to special patient care and bacta mixture instruction. She’d failed to request a second Doctor of her specialty for dealing with injuries in her off hours. She’d tainted Helkor’s sterling reputation by having him shipped off without so much as an explanation.

The list continued, only growing more outrageous and more slanderous as it went, that she’d simply requested a written copy of all the charges against her and named Cordé her co-council. The tribunal had made her repeat the designation twice before reluctantly allowing her to be her own council. They advised her against it, but hadn’t been able to provide a Jedi Master — her requested council — due to the war.

Padmé had also filed notice of intent to counter charge, but requested time to complete her list. They’d given her 72 hours.

And so, Cordé and Padmé had gone over all of her notes. They went over all of the security holo footage Mik had thoughtfully provided, one of which included Padmé’s final discussion with Helkor, and also their confrontation over Anakin’s treatment in the bacta. Mik had also grabbed the footage from the surgery, as well as the second amputation, a scene that had Padmé and Cordé turning away in utter disgust.

Those alone would be enough to have the charges dropped, as they could be, and would be, backed up by any of the nurses that had been present at the time. Padmé sent Mik a quick, un-encrypted thank you note and requested her presence for the tribunal’s trial in three weeks.

Padmé was forced to focus on the tribunal and the charges, leaving little time to miss Anakin. But miss him she did. She missed him when Cordé joined her for both morning and evening meals; she missed him when she was watching the holo footage of his surgeries, her

heart aching for his mistreatment at Helkor's hands. She missed his smile, his exuberance. She missed his touch and his kiss. And she missed his embrace.

She often woke from dreams of him to find her arms around herself, stretching to try and mimic his embrace.

Cordé did her best to distract her friend, and keep her focused on the trial. So much, that Cordé set a schedule. Mornings and afternoons were for trial business. Evenings, they would speak about Anakin, and Cordé encouraged Padmé to write him. While she wouldn't be able to send the letters, she could document all the things she wanted to tell him and give them to him when she saw him next.

It was a habit that possibly saved Padmé's sanity and allowed her to focus on the trial.

The morning she filed the counter charges brought another surprise. Helkor's council sent word, directly after the meeting, that Helkor wished to meet her to discuss terms for a deal. Padmé informed him in no uncertain terms that she wasn't willing to deal, but if he could put together a proposal, she'd be willing to take it into consideration during the trial.

The tribunal sent her their decision the following morning.

They would hear evidence from Helkor for three weeks, as he was the aggrieved party, and then would hear evidence from Padmé for three weeks to defend herself. Once all of the evidence had been heard, the Tribunal would delegate, with a deadline of one week, and then the process would repeat in reverse. Padmé would have three weeks to present her case against Helkor and Helkor would have three weeks to defend himself.

Padmé was dismayed to realize that with all of the time allotted, she would likely be unemployed and unable to be employed in her chosen field, for the better part of five or six months! The thought of being cooped up in her apartment for even half of that was dispiriting.

Yet, despite the security measures surrounding her, Anakin managed to smuggle in a message.

Cordé found it while running through the security tapes that Mik had thoughtfully sent with her affirmative reply of coming for trial. She also included a note with regards to the tests Padmé had been running on the clones prior to her departure.

The clones weren't deteriorating. They were simply becoming fatigued and battle weary. At least, those units that were always taking the heaviest casualties and never seemed to get leave. No one had thought Clones, bred for battle, would become battle weary and require leave.

Padmé had laughed at Mik's disdain for the upper management, and noted that she and Lana had been placed in charge of the medical unit. Padmé couldn't have been prouder of the two if she'd tried. While she knew Lana's expertise in the neo-natal unit was surely missed, she'd earned the chance to spread her wings and take charge.

Cordé was searching and sorting when Anakin's roguish image appeared on the screen, looking nervous despite the fact he was talking to a holo cam. She stopped the recording and stared at the picture.

“Padmé?”

Padmé didn’t look up from the notes she was making on a datapad. “Hmm?”

“Padmé.”

“What?”

“I think this one is for your eyes only.”

Padmé looked up surprised and sucked in a sharp breath as she caught sight of Anakin’s image. “Anakin!”

Cordé nodded, grinning from ear to ear, and passed over the holo recorder. Then, giving her friend privacy, she left, heading for the kitchenette to make lunch.

Padmé waited until Cordé was gone, drinking in the sight of Anakin’s strong features. She didn’t turn the message on, simply looked at his image. The way his hair hung casually, but sexily, across his forehead. The way his Jedi Robes, uniquely his design, hung off his powerful shoulders. The way his nervousness was almost shining through the earnest expression on his face. She reached out, wishing the picture were solid so she could touch him.

Her hand dropped back to her lap and she hit the play button.

Anakin cleared his throat. *“Is that thing on, Artoo?”*

A familiar whistle off camera had her eyes widening in surprise, but Anakin’s caustic answer didn’t let her dwell on the comment. It didn’t let her focus on that whistle or where she remembered it from. Instead, his continuation buried that fragment in the recesses of her mind for later retrieval. For the moment, her attention was squarely, hungrily, on Anakin.

“Ok, ok, I get it, don’t fry your circuits.” Anakin straightened his robe and then smiled. *“Hello Padmé. I hope this reaches you because Artoo is going to a lot of trouble — with my help — to ensure it does. I wanted to tell you how sorry I am that you won’t be back any time soon. Mik took the time, during my last exam, to explain how long it could be before you return. The war might be over by then — and you’d be out of a job.”*

He smiled softly, the action so full of yearning it made her heart ache. *“I miss you, Padmé. It’s not the same out here without you. I feel different, disappointed, knowing that you’re not going to be there to patch my scrapes and bruises. I miss everything about you, but I think I miss the sound of your voice the most. I sometimes dream you’re still here scolding me about taking my recovery too fast.”*

He shook his head. *“We sure could have used someone with your talents on the ground with us these last few days. We’ve lost a lot of good, talented Jedi since you left. Not that it reflects on Mik and Lana. Both are good, but they’re not you. We did identify our newest enemy; a robot general named Grievous. He’s something else; but I’ll save that for another time when I can go into detail. It’s been almost two weeks since you let me go back to the Jedi. Two weeks, and all I can think about is you. I hope I’ll see you before the trial, but I know I won’t. I’ve been told to keep this short, so I’ll just say this. I hope you’re dreaming of me, because I am certainly dreaming of you. Until we meet again, Angel.”*

His image faded from view and Padmé let out the breath she hadn't known she was holding. She closed her eyes, letting his words reply in her mind, letting the sound of his voice, a sound she hadn't realized she so dearly missed, soothe her senses. The ache in the back of her throat became more prominent and she swallowed hard, fighting back the sudden feeling of tears. She missed him too; oh how she wished he could be here!

"Anything interesting?"

Padmé's gaze flew to the understanding expression her friend wore, and she rubbed her hand across her face, fighting back the tears of loneliness. Cordé extended one of the steaming mugs she held towards her friend, and Padmé accepted it gratefully, wrapping her hands around the warmth. "Nothing unusual. He wrote to say he misses me and to keep me up to date on what's happening in his quest to find the monster that's been hunting Jedi."

"And?"

"And what?"

"Well, did they find the creature they were looking for?"

"He said it's some kind of droid General named Grievous." Padmé frowned and shook her head. "I hope he's being careful."

"You don't think so?"

"Anakin?" Padmé's frown disappeared to be replaced by a tolerant, accepting grin. "If the fight I saw against Dooku was any indication, he hasn't got a clue what 'careful' means."

"He's skilled though."

"The best, according to Obi-Wan."

"Little comfort." Cordé settled onto the sofa with Padmé. "I know it's tough, but we really do need to keep focused. Maybe I should have waited until tonight to show that to you."

"No." Padmé took a sip of her drink. "I'm just glad he's alright. Thanks for the cocoa."

"I've soup on the burner and biscuits in the cooker." Cordé smiled. "We're going to be working hard to ensure we have everything we need to counter Helkor's accusations; and make the ones you have against him stick."

"I don't think it'll be that hard, Cordé. After all, his accusations are all based on his word against mine — with witnesses."

"Witnesses can be bribed."

"Not these ones." Padmé's tone was full of conviction. "I just wish I wasn't stuck here. Though, I guess it's justice since Helkor was placed under house arrest until we get this whole mess sorted out. If I'm lucky I'll be a free woman while he's still under arrest."

Cordé regarded her friend shrewdly. "Just what are you hoping to accomplish?"

"Nothing less than his full resignation from the medical practice. He's dangerous, Cordé, and it's my ethical duty to make sure he can't harm another being. After what he did to the Jedi in my medical ward, he shouldn't be allowed to practice medicine ever again!"

“Even if it costs you?” Cordé nodded to the holo emitter, her meaning clear.

Padmé looked at the emitter, and her shoulders slumped. “Even if it costs me.”

“Then you’re a fool.” Cordé sighed. “Nothing is worth missing out on the chance you have with Anakin. Not your career, not your professional ethics and certainly not a podo like Helkor!”

Padmé was quiet for a moment before placing the holo emitter carefully on the table and wrapping both hands around the cup of cocoa. “My head is telling me you’re wrong, Cordé.”

“But.”

Padmé sighed. “My heart is telling me you’re right. Anakin’s special. I wouldn’t miss him this much if he wasn’t — but that’s a problem. What if, somehow, that’s brought against me at trial?”

“You mean this...” Cordé searched through the pads on the table before finding the one she was looking for. “The ‘audio evidence’ Helkor’s going to bring before the tribunal?”

Padmé nodded. “He was dismissed before Anakin regained consciousness, but I can’t help but feel that he was sneaky enough to plant some kind of recording device.”

“Even if he was, the device wouldn’t have been able to record indefinitely. It would have ran out what, in a week or two?”

“True. And Anakin and I didn’t do anything until he was well into building his arm.”

“Do anything?” Cordé’s eyebrows arched. “Did you neglect to tell me about your extra curricular activities with the Jedi?”

“Cordé!” Padmé blushed, grinning. “You know I didn’t. Anakin and I haven’t... I mean we’ve never... never er... copulated.”

“Copulated?” Cordé burst out laughing. “Trust you to turn something that’s supposed to be magical and fun into a technical exercise. Especially when he’s your first.”

“He’s not the—”

“Spare me!” Cordé rolled her eyes, taking a sip of her drink. “I know you’ve never been with a man, Padmé. I only hope Anakin knows how special that is when you finally let him that close.”

“Cordé!”

“What? Don’t you already have the next twenty years mapped out?”

Padmé’s gaze dropped to her cup at her friend’s tease, knowing she shouldn’t be offended, but still caught off guard by the blunt comments. “Only the next ten.”

“Only?” Cordé laughed softly. “Can I assume they include such momentous events as your wedding and wedding night? Along with the birth of your first and possibly second child?”

Padmé felt her cheeks heat as Cordé’s assessment was delivered. She wondered why she felt so offended when her friend was just voicing what she’d already planned. For Cordé was right. She’d already dreamed of the next ten years. Years that included one young, handsome

Jedi Knight and their perfectly adorable children — all with blue eyes the color of Nabooian skies.

“I knew it!” Cordé shook her head in amusement. “I suppose there’s nothing wrong with that — providing we can get your *derriere* out of this mess intact.”

“You don’t think we can?”

“On the contrary, I know we can; providing Helkor doesn’t bring in surprise witnesses or evidence we haven’t seen yet.”

“There’s nothing he can bring in against me that will show malpractice, Cordé. You know me; I take my job very seriously.”

“Especially when it’s a dark haired-drop-dead-gorgeous Jedi?” Cordé’s tease was followed by a laugh. “I know, I know, you didn’t notice until *after* his surgery was over and he was in the recovery room, but I can’t resist teasing you.”

Padmé threw one of the pillows on the couch at her friend. “You’re horrible. Still, the case in my defense is air tight. I have the report, and the date and time stamps it was written, to back up my dismissal of him. Of course, they may not understand that I couldn’t send the report as most of our transmissions were limited to essential traffic only. The Syndicate doesn’t like to think of themselves as non-essential.”

“The Jedi would back up that claim; they’re the ones who imposed the restriction in the first place.”

“True, but getting one of the Council members to come and speak for me at the tribunal isn’t going to be easy. From the numbers Mik has sent me, the Jedi are taking heavier casualties now that this Grievous is methodically hunting them down. The lucky ones escape, the rest...” She sighed. “I hope they’re being careful.”

Cordé reached across to pat her knee. “You don’t think Anakin will be careful knowing he has to come back to you?”

Padmé blushed. “I hope he will, but you didn’t see him on Geonosis. He’s still got a bit of a reckless streak.”

Cordé waved one hand dismissively. “That’s beside the point; he didn’t know you loved him then.”

“I didn’t know I loved him then!” Padmé grinned. “I don’t think I did love him then; though I admit I was attracted — I kept thinking he looked familiar.”

“Your heart has better sense than your head.” Cordé picked up another data rod and slid it into one of the data pads. “But it won’t do you any good if we don’t use those smarts to exonerate you and prevent Helkor from practicing again.”

That signaled an end to their discussion as they returned to the information, meticulously checking and cross checking information and evidence. Padmé, later that evening, sent a coded message to Yoda and Mace to formally request the assistance of one of their Masters as a witness. The message, having to be scrambled and redirected, would take two days to reach them. She only hoped, as she hit the send button, that Master Yoda’s offer for help had been genuine. She would likely need every bit she could get.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18

“Are you ready, Ms. Naberrie?”

“Yes, your Excellencies.” Padmé settled herself at the defendants table in the Tribunal’s grievance room. Helkor and his formal representative were sitting at the aggrieved party’s table, speaking in low tones, and acknowledging that they, too, were ready.

The Tribunal, made up of five of the highest ranking and most respected members of the Syndicate, was ranged in front of them. There was no dais, no imposing bench where the Syndicate members sat to lord over them. The room was set up like a meeting room, the head table semi-circular as if to reach out to each of them.

Padmé found the symbolism trite, but wasn’t about to say so, especially since Cordé wasn’t able to attend due to a medical emergency at the Jedi temple that had brought Jocasta Nu to their door early that morning. Cordé had been torn, but Padmé had insisted she go. The Jedi were the last people who would be trying to sink her, so the emergency had to be critical if the temple’s archivist had come to look for them.

Cordé had promised to come as soon as she was no longer required.

Which meant Padmé’s first official day to hear evidence before the tribunal was by herself. She sat with confidence as Helkor’s representative was given the floor, certain the charges would be dropped in the first week of trials. Once that happened she could focus on her suit against Helkor and the intention to have his license revoked. Padmé listened with only have an ear to the re-reading of the charges; she knew them almost as well as she knew her own name. She’d investigated each one meticulously and been unable to find fault in her actions for any of them.

How Helkor was intending to prove them was the wild card she didn’t yet know.

The day dragged on as Helkor’s representative, a Rodian by the name of Lebo, outlined the case for the Tribunal. It was a formality, but a necessity in the event he presented any charges that hadn’t yet been put into print. Padmé listened intently as his opening came to a close.

“As you can see, your Excellencies, we intend to prove that Ms. Naberrie acted hastily in dismissing my client. We also intend to prove that she was an inadvisable choice to head the medical detachment on the frigate as her expertise does not lie in management. To summarize, we intend to prove to you, without a doubt, that Ms. Naberrie dismissed my client without cause, was lax in her responsibilities and placed the welfare of the few above the welfare of the many, leading to malpractice.”

Lebo’s speech ended and Padmé digested the words. Nothing new in the accusations, though how they intended to prove their case was the most curious of questions.

“Ms. Naberrie?”

Padmé rose to her feet, taking a moment to look carefully at Lebo and Helkor before turning confidently to the tribunal. “I have already entered a formal complaint for the slanderous accusations against me. I intend to prove that I am not guilty of malpractice or dereliction of duty, which is what this fancy list amounts to. If I am indeed found to be guilty of the things I am accused of, I intend to prove that I had good reasons for my actions and that they were warranted under the circumstances.”

She kept her opening short, knowing the tribunal would appreciate it after Lebo’s long-winded opener.

The tribunal regarded each other curiously as Padmé sat. “You’ve nothing more to say, Ms. Naberrie?”

She stood. “No, your Excellency. I could add more, if you wish, but I will simply be regurgitating what I have already said. In the interest of commencing the formal trial, and completing it in a timely manner, I am not compelled to say more.”

“As you wish.” The tribunal’s members communicated briefly over their securely linked data pads. Finally, the same member, the obvious spokesperson, spoke again. “We appreciate your candor, Ms. Naberrie, thank you for your consideration. Mr. Lebo, the floor is yours.”

Padmé inclined her head and settled back in her chair as Lebo rose and called his first witness.

Padmé hadn’t been surprised at the witnesses on Helkor’s list. They were all members that hadn’t made the cut for her medical staff. Disgruntled and spiteful people who had only come to ‘help’ because it would raise their own standards — and keep them out of the fighting.

She declined to cross examine the first two, as they were only material witnesses; civilians that hadn’t spent more than a few hours in her company before being dismissed. She braced herself for a round of hostile witnesses, all of which would call her domineering and controlling.

The first week and a half held more of the same. Lebo went so far as to call in the clone medics that had watched in those first, hectic days — before the triage had been set up correctly — as their ‘brothers’ hadn’t been processed quickly enough and many had died of wounds that the over-worked and under-staffed, under-trained medical staff hadn’t been able to attend to.

It had been before the medics themselves had been pulled into the triage system.

Padmé took her lumps with grace, listening to the graphic stories with compassion and understanding. She knew the clones were only doing as they’d been told. They’d been told to relay their earliest observations; nothing else.

Thankfully, Padmé hadn’t placed any of them on her own witness list, and while their early testimony would be damning, Mik and the other three nurses that were still on the front line, would testify later, for the tribunal to hear how things steadily improved, changes visible daily, until Helkor arrived.

Padmé simply bid her time. She took the opportunities to ask the relevant questions. Did the situation improve after the first two weeks? Were more medical personnel available in the days to come? Had the supplies been given to the medics in the field been enough to deal

with triage in the field? Had that improved? Had the casualties in the OR eventually dwindled to nothing? How had things been different in the days with Helkor in charge?

She thanked each of the Troopers that testified and were cross-examined, adding that she understood they were only doing as ordered. The Troopers, for all their lack of personality, appeared grateful that she didn't think less of them for speaking out against her. It was an attitude she understood well, and one that she hoped would serve her purposes in future sessions.

The last week and a half of Helkor's accusation period proved to be the most eventful as Helkor himself spent two days telling his side of the story to the tribunal...

"I arrive on the Medical frigate as a volunteer. I gave up my practice to contribute to the war effort and was assigned to do triage." His tone was level, but Padmé could see the disdain he held for the position in his eyes. He hadn't agreed with her assignment of him. "I was placed in charge of a motley crew of inexperienced and incompetent nurses who did not understand the meaning of 'prioritize' — they did not understand that a critically injured clone needed to be seen before a seriously wounded Jedi."

Padmé made to get up, to object to the statement — Mik and Lana and their team had been given those instructions by her! Cordé's hand grasped her and squeezed, keeping her in her chair and the Nurse fractionally shook her head. Padmé took a deep breath. Her chance would come — Helkor wasn't yet open to questions; he was simply relaying his point of view of the events.

Helkor continued. "The triage unit was a mess until I took over, though the insubordinate nurses didn't listen to my instructions for treating clones and Jedi alike. They'd been given instructions by Ms. Naberrie to deal with the most heavily wounded Jedi before attempting to assist any clone."

Padmé ground her teeth together, somehow keeping her jaw closed. That hadn't been an easy decision, but one that had come as a request from the council. The clones were a renewable resource and were bred in tanks where it took years to train a Jedi Knight. "Easy." Cordé's low whisper did little to ease the tension in her frame. "You'll get your chance, Padmé. Let him give his skewed point of view."

Padmé managed a slight smile and a jerk of a nod for her friend. She took a deep breath glad to have her friend's support as Helkor's outrageous testimony continued.

Lebo was pacing in front of the chair in which Helkor sat. "Did you try and reason with Ms. Naberrie, Mr. Helkor?"

"I tried but she refused to listen. She gave me some story about orders, expendability and priorities. It was clear afterwards that she didn't understand anything about running a triage center."

"So what did you do?"

"I waited." Helkor's smile was cold. "I watched as she fretted over the Jedi, passing by far more critically injured patients to readjust a mix on this bacta tank, or that one. I watched as she instructed her staff to bypass clones with life-threatening injuries in favor of those Jedi or civilians without such injuries. I watched as she spent more time agonizing over Anakin

Skywalker's injuries and his treatments without lending her abilities to those clones that might be in need of them. Many good men died in triage for being unable to get the care they deserved and needed."

Helkor's expression was mournfully regretful. Padmé felt sick to her stomach. He'd painted her as a heartless, Jedi-obsessed irrational woman who couldn't tell a critically injured patient if it struck her in the face. She took a deep breath, forcing herself to be calm, to keep her cool. He was probably trying to deliberately provoke her into a show of irrational emotion, thus justifying his point.

Lebo didn't appear to be aware of anything happening in the room beyond his client's testimony. He paced back and forth. "So what did you do?"

"What any sensible Doctor does when the opportunity arises. Ms. Nabberrie collapsed after several exhaustive days of attempting to nobly save Jedi Skywalker's arms. They'd both been severed — her specialty — and she'd been able to reattach them. Only the right one had complications and her exhaustive efforts to overcome them caused her collapse in the bacta ward." His words were almost admiring — grudgingly so. "I took charge. I was the only other properly trained Doctor available, and so I took over, leaving instructions that she was to sleep herself out. And then, I set things to rights."

"How so?" Lebo's tone was politely inquiring, his black, expressive eyes taking in both the tribunal members and his client.

"I re-prioritized the patient listing of course." Helkor's tone was now scornful. "The clones needed far more immediate care than any Jedi. Plus, the Jedi had their own medics. I restructured the lists so that the most critically injured clones would be placed into bacta within hours, had those who could wait for care removed, and delegated the nurses to additional tasks in the bacta ward and triage to ensure proper and fair care was being given to each individual. I forbade any special treatment of the Jedi wounded, and placed them on the same schedule as everyone else. My system was flawless; it worked perfectly."

Padmé's nails bit deeply into the skin of her palms as she clenched her fists in an effort to resist leaping across the table to pummel the lying bastard. His 'system' had cost multiple Jedi and civilians their lives. Cordé's hand squeezed her arm and Padmé managed a stiff nod to say she understood, but the rigidity in her posture didn't fade.

"I see. Now, can you explain to the tribunal what happened next?"

"Jedi Skywalker's right arm took a turn for the worst and we were forced to amputate. It was regrettable; however, the injury doesn't appear to have slowed him down any. He has become quite the Hero for the Jedi, hasn't he?"

Lebo's antenna twitched. "Stick to the facts please, Mr. Helkor. We are all familiar with the Jedi's poster boy and his exploits."

Helkor's head tilted shifted, indicating his displeasure, but he did as requested. "Well, if we hadn't amputated Jedi Skywalker's arm, he would have died. The wound became septic, despite Ms. Nabberrie's efforts and it fell to me to correct the error. The following day Ms. Nabberrie awoke and resumed her role. I received no thank you for saving Jedi Skywalker's life or for turning her backwards operation into a successful triage center. Instead she bullied

me into surgery to ‘fix’ the damaged she claimed I’d caused to Skywalker and then had the nerve to send me back here without so much as a note of explanation as to why.”

“She didn’t speak with you first?”

Helkor waved away the question. “If it’s not in writing, discussion between physicians are off the record. Whatever she said to me wasn’t ground for dismissal.”

“And after that discussion?”

Helkor’s gaze turned to Padmé. “I was escorted off the station like some kind of criminal and brought back here where I returned to my original practice. Unfortunately the rumors had already begun circulating. I was initially willing to let this pass, but the damage has been done to my previously unblemished record. Her failure to follow procedure has also left me open to speculation and ridicule from my peers and colleagues.”

“She didn’t follow procedure?”

Helkor’s expression was all regret. “Unfortunately no. She was supposed to file the required forms and report as to why I had been dismissed. She failed to do so, and so my employer, looking for these as any good employer does, construed that her failure meant I had deserted my post on the frigate. I lost my job as a consequence. The Syndicate has assigned me to the general hospital until another posting for me can be found.”

Lebo consulted his notes. “Did you keep in contact with any of the personnel on board the medical frigate?”

“Outbound traffic was regulated by the Jedi; even if I wanted to I would have been unable. Fortunately, I set up a recording device to ensure Ms. Naberrie’s actions towards Jedi Skywalker were purely professional.”

Padmé’s stomach flipped, dipping low into her shoes. A recording device. How long had he been listening in? Had he heard anything incriminating? Somehow, she managed to keep her emotions off her face, though she could tell that Cordé was nervous about the allegation and evidence as well.

Lebo produced a voice recorder and something in Padmé’s brain clicked.

The half-healed incision on Anakin’s neck, the one that hadn’t healed for all his time in the bacta tank. The *thing* that had been under his skin. The implant had been a recording device of such small stature Anakin hadn’t even felt it. A lance of fear shot down her spine. Had the recording device had enough power to gather the damning evidence of their time together? Would her profession of love be her undoing as a physician? Had the unit had enough power to last that long?

Lebo hooked up a data rod. “With your permission, Excellencies, I present exhibit thirteen for the aggrieved.”

The Tribunal members conferred and the spokesperson nodded. “We will enter it in as evidence; however, the hour grows late. We will reconvene tomorrow morning at 0900.”

Padmé sucked in a sharp breath. Tomorrow? She had to wait until *tomorrow* to hear the recordings? She felt like she was going to burst with frustration as Lebo acquiesced to the Tribunal’s instructions and put the datarod away. Cordé rose to her feet and pulled Padmé to

hers as the Tribunal members exited. She then pulled the unresisting Doctor from the room before Lebo and Helkor could approach.

Padmé moved woodenly, her mind racing, trying to remember what had happened in those first few days with Anakin out of the bacta. Was there anything that had been said which could come back to haunt her now. Was it even permissible under the patient/doctor privilege? She pulled up short, dragging Cordé to a halt.

Cordé looked back at her friend concerned. “Padmé? Are you alright?”

“Can we block that recording?”

Cordé blinked. “How?”

“Because it infringes on Patient/Physician confidentiality.” Padmé’s words were slow as she thought the objection out, carefully choosing her words. “When I’m alone with a Patient, we’re protected by the law. I’m not obligated to disclose any part of any conversation that I have with anyone. It’s the reason recording devices aren’t standard in any clinic. Helkor’s infringed my rights and Anakin’s. He’s violated Anakin’s person and implanted an illegal device without his permission.”

Cordé thought about it and then nodded, a grin splitting her face. “Come on; let’s go put that in writing so we can slap it on the little slime pool in the morning. The look on his face should be highly entertaining.”

“We’ve got to put this just right.” Padmé’s agreement was almost enthusiastic and she felt her spirits lift as she realized the contents of the tape would never be heard. Not once their moral objection was before the tribunal. “I, for one, am starving, how about you?”

Cordé didn’t have to respond as they joined up with their “guards”. Helkor wouldn’t be able to present the tape without admitting to having violated Anakin’s rights. Even if he argued he’d done it in the interest of *protecting* Anakin, he still would have needed some kind of written permission to do an implant.

Either way, Helkor would have to drop the evidence and it would become inadmissible. To celebrate their impending victory they took the whole lot out for dinner.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19

“We are now in session. Mr. Lebo, you were introducing evidence number thirteen?”

“Your Excellencies.” Padmé stood. “I have an objection to evidence number thirteen.” Her voice was firm, confident as she spoke before Lebo had the chance to continue.

The Tribunal members shared a glance before the Spokesperson nodded. “Proceed, Ms. Naberrie.”

Padmé cleared her throat and rose to her feet, meeting the gaze of each of the Tribunal members squarely as she presented a data rod with her objection to the Spokesperson. “I apologize for not putting this objection in writing before hand. As I was not aware of the method in which Mr. Helkor had gathered his ‘vocal evidence’ I had no basis in which to form one. Having heard his testimony regarding it has led me to believe it was gathered unethically.”

“Continue.”

She had their attention.

“During my examinations of Jedi Skywalker I noted a strange, half-heeled incision on his neck that was covering some kind of implant. An implant which looks exactly like the datarod Mr. Lebo entered into evidence yesterday. As you are aware, no recording devices of any kind are permitted in a patient’s room due to the confidentiality of the Patient/Physician privilege. Unless, of course, the patient gives written permission, or a physician obtains an official order for personal protection, to have such a device installed. As the device would have been inside Jedi Skywalker’s room, in fact installed on his person without his knowledge or consent, the verbal evidence is inadmissible.”

“And you’re positive Jedi Skywalker would not have given his consent?”

Padmé nodded. “He was unconscious until he awoke after Mr. Helkor had been dismissed.”

The Tribunal members conferred among themselves through the linked datapads and Padmé managed not to shift her stance. She wasn’t going to act nervous; not with Helkor and Lebo shooting her barely concealed glares across the room.

The Spokesperson finally lifted their head. “Mr. Lebo. Did your client obtain and kind of official documentation to allow such a device to be placed?”

Lebo conferred with Helkor for a moment and then, almost sourly, shook his head. “No your Excellency. He said there was no time due to the situation.”

“I see.” The Tribunal members went back to their discussion.

Padmé held her breath. If she could keep this piece of evidence out of the trial, it was possible others had been obtained illegally and subject to the same sanctions. If she could prove it, Helkor's case would slowly crumble and he'd be left with nothing. Not that she really had much to go on, but a hunch told her this was a key piece of evidence in Helkor's malpractice case. Without it, he'd have to withdraw the charge.

The Spokesperson finally folded their hands on the desk. "Mr. Helkor."

"Your Excellencies." He stood, looking distinctly uncomfortable.

"Explain to this body exactly where this device was planted and what, if any, official channels you went through to obtain permission to have it inside a patient's room."

Helkor cast a murderous look at Padmé. "I was unable to follow any of the official channels, your Excellencies, due to the communications blackout the Jedi had the fleet under. I was forced to take drastic measures due to the nature of the care I had seen Ms. Naberrie giving the Jedi. I didn't believe such personal attention from the physician in charge of a large medical ward was warranted nor called for. I felt Ms. Naberrie's intentions towards Jedi Skywalker may not have been completely honorable."

"I see." The Tribunal members conferred for another moment before the Spokesperson continued. Helkor's omission of where the device had been planted wasn't missed. "Without this piece of evidence, evidence which we deem to have been illegally gathered, can your case for malpractice against Ms. Naberrie proceed?"

Helkor looked to Lebo. Lebo shook his head fractionally. "It cannot."

The Spokesperson waved him to sit. "The motion to suppress is granted. This body will not hear the vocal evidence and the charge of Malpractice, and all connected charges, are dismissed. Mr. Lebo, the floor is yours. We remind you that you may now only present evidence for the charges remaining."

Padmé sank down into her chair, almost in disbelief. They'd won. They'd actually beaten the Malpractice suit! Not that she'd doubted they'd be able to, but in one decisive stroke due to a miscalculation on Helkor's part, effectively half of the charges were no longer applicable.

Lebo stood reluctantly. "We request a recess, Your Excellencies, to discuss how we're to best proceed with the rest of the charges."

"Very well." The Spokesperson nodded. "We will reconvene at 1300 this afternoon."

Padmé stayed where she was sitting as Helkor and Lebo left, arguing in hushed tones. Cordé let out a whoop as soon as they were gone, drawing a mildly reproving look from the Tribunal members who were still occupying the room. Cordé grinned unrepentantly. "You did it!"

"We're not done yet, Cordé." Padmé cautioned her friend, but couldn't keep the relieved smile off her face. "We've still got to deal with the rest of the charges and he has the rest of the week to present."

"Unless he can prove you're incompetent — and I know he can't, there's no way he can win this case."

"I'm inclined to be more cautiously optimistic. I didn't think he'd take this matter to the Syndicate either, and he did. There's still the chance that my witnesses won't be able to make it, or something pops up which convinces the Tribunal that I wasn't acting in the best interest of my charges. Thankfully, two of the members are battlefield medics from wars in the past."

"How do you know that?" Cordé arched an eyebrow, clicking the case holding their information closed. "We haven't had a war in a long, long time."

"Maybe not a galactic war, but there have been conflicts on civil fronts. The Spokesperson and the female Twi'lek were first responders in the last Corellian civil war. They were on planet when the fighting broke out."

"How do you know that?"

Padmé grinned, pushing to her feet. "Because I know my Syndicate's top members, unlike my staff."

Cordé handed the documents case to Padmé. "I may not know all of the top members, but I know which surgical implements you'll need before you need them."

"True. I guess we all have our specialties."

"Indeed we do."

Padmé froze as she stepped out of the Tribunal room, certain she was hearing things. That voice, the one she'd been longing to hear since leaving the fleet, couldn't be here. Not when its owner was supposed to be half a galaxy away. She turned slowly, not believing her ears, and faced the shadow from where it had come.

Cordé, on the other hand, had no problem finding her voice. "Jedi Skywalker, I presume?" Her excitement was barely contained.

Anakin nodded, stepping from the shadows and pulled his hood back. He looked at Cordé briefly, but his gaze quickly moved to Padmé. Those blue eyes burned, as if he'd touched her, taking in her appearance from head to toe; drinking in her presence. "I am. You must be Cordé."

Cordé accepted his handshake with a nod, not seemingly the least insulted by the face he didn't meet her gaze and was all eyes for Padmé. "I'm glad Padmé mentioned me." She nudged her friend. "It seems her specialty right now is silence."

Padmé was staring at him in shock, completely taken by surprise at his entrance. "Anakin."

His smile, that soft, loving smile just for her, appeared for a moment. "It's really me."

She made to move to him and then paused, casting a nervous look left and right, expecting to find an audience, before turning her gaze back to him. She wanted nothing more than to jump into his arms, burrow into their strength. She wanted to feel his hands on her face, his lips on her skin; she wanted to greet him like any woman greets her beloved. To hold him and never let him go. But she couldn't. There were people in the hallway. And people, regardless of knowledge, would gossip. She knew her look was tortured, showing what she wished she could do and couldn't.

He nodded once, showing he understood and extended his hand. She read desire in his eyes, flames that burned, banked for the occasion as she took it. She smiled, tears welling in her eyes when he brought her hand to his lips, gently caressing the back of it with his thumb before kissing it softly. "It has been far too long, milady."

Her mind reeled. He wasn't supposed to be here — how was she supposed to respond to such a cordial greeting? Her professional instincts kicked in, her response almost automatic. "Indeed, Jedi Skywalker. Far too long." She took a deep breath, her heart racing at such a simple, but energized, touch. She strove for neutral ground, anything to disperse the knot of tension his touch had tightened in her gut. "How's the arm?"

"Good as new." He reluctantly let go of her hand, his tone turning serious. "But it's partially why I'm here."

It was as effective as a cold shower, her libido taking a back seat to her concern. "What's happened?" Padmé began to systematically search his body for injuries, alarmed when she saw dark patches on his clothing. Dark patches that looked like blood. "Are you hurt?"

"No, but Master Windu is in need of your special skills, Padmé."

Padmé glanced at Cordé and then back to Anakin, torn between duty and moral obligation. If she practiced any kind of medical knowledge, despite the circumstances, she could lose everything. Her right to practice. Her reputation. Her freedom. "I can't — they revoked my license."

"You can, the license doesn't mean you don't have the ability."

"I haven't done any operations in weeks."

Anakin gripped her arms urgently, pleading with her. "He'll die if you don't help him. Please, Padmé, we're running out of time."

"I'll grab the kit and meet you at the temple." Cordé took off running, heading for the speeder bay to collect a transport to the clinic.

Padmé glanced at the closed doors to the Tribunal's room and made her decision, which was no decision at all for all her token resistance. She met Anakin's gaze and nodded. "Take me to him."

Chapter 20

Chapter 20

Padmé was rushed into the infirmary in the Jedi Temple without so much as a glance, and assisted into scrubs by three Jedi Healers in record time. Cordé was already waiting, having begun the prep of the Jedi Master, the blood that was needed for the procedure already hooked up, the surgical instruments lined up for easy access.

Padmé entered the surgery, getting her first glimpse of the wounded Jedi, and just about lost her lunch. Cordé was flanked by four more Jedi Healers, all of which were touching a part of the Jedi Master's battered body.

Mace's injuries were horrific, the worst Padmé had ever seen. His right arm was hanging by a thread of muscle from his shoulder. His right shoulder had been separated from the rest of his body completely and *something* had cleaved into the side of his neck, hitting the artery, but not severing it.

The Jedi Master was slowly bleeding out on the surgical table.

Padmé stepped to the table and extended her hand to Cordé, keeping her eyes on the pulsing artery in Mace's neck. She had to close that first, before any other injury could be attended to, or they'd lose him. Cordé placed the first tool into the open palm and Padmé got to work.

They worked tirelessly, Padmé using soluble, but durable, stitches in the Jedi Master's injuries. The neck wound was the easiest, but most critical, to sew and so it was her first priority. Once closed, she didn't pause except to wipe the sweat off her forehead with her elbow. She moved on, slowly closing the Master's neck wound and sewing the tendon and muscle back together to ensure he wouldn't lose the range of mobility he would need.

The hours passed quickly, the Jedi Healers rotating out of the room and relieving one another as they practiced keeping Mace in a semi-trance so not to feel the pain and to slow the rate at which the blood left his body. They managed to keep it to the same rate in which it was being replenished by Cordé's machines. It was a talent Padmé only noticed in passing, but was thankful for. Without it, Mace would have been dead long before she'd arrived.

Padmé's work on Mace's shoulder, reattaching all of the tendons and muscles, took the better part of the morning and ran into the afternoon. She worked tirelessly, aware that Mace's life was not yet out of the danger zone, deliberately and systematically reconnecting tissue, bone and cartilage.

She didn't notice the passing of time in minutes, but felt it in her hands. She paused to flex them every now and again to ensure she didn't lose their mobility, but never stopped for too long. Mace's injuries were severe enough she didn't dare stop for more than a few moments.

Absolutely focused, she didn't notice as 1300 came and went and with it her chance at refuting more of Helkor's testimony. For with, or without her, the Tribunal would continue. Not that she noticed. As she worked on Mace, the ramifications of her actions were as far from her thoughts as Tatooine was from the bright center of the universe.

It was well into that evening when she tied the last of the knots on his shoulder, bringing the darkened skin together and sealing the last of his gaping shoulder wounds. Padmé paused only to stretch before she began work reattaching the arm to the newly reattached shoulder.

It was almost midnight by the time she finished. Her fingers were beginning to cramp in spasms and her back was aching as she motioned for Cordé to start the blood transfusions running at full power. The machine whirled up and Padmé watched the monitors carefully to ensure that the analysis tools were accurately recording the amount of blood in the Jedi Master's system.

If the Healers hadn't kept him in the trance, Padmé was certain she would have lost him in the first hours; probably even before she'd even arrived. It was because of their patience and strength she'd been given that precious extra time to work. Time she'd needed and was thankful for. Even now they were keeping his vital signs stable as his body was slowly replenished of the blood it had lost. Somehow they were controlling the bodily functions of the Jedi Master.

Cord placed a hand on Padmé's shoulder. "You're exhausted and Mace should be put into bacta as soon as we can. Come on."

Padmé looked to the Jedi healers, knowing she should wrap his wounds herself and see that the mixture in the tanks were appropriate, but her mind was starting to get fuzzy as the stress and adrenaline that had been keeping her going was beginning to bleed off. But she couldn't leave yet; she had to see him put into bacta. She needed to. If she didn't, she would never sleep regardless of her exhaustion.

One of the Jedi Healers entered the room and slowly brought the others out of their trances, relinquishing their hold on the Jedi Master's bodily functions. Slowly, over the next few minutes, Mace's battered body resumed functioning normally. Padmé kept a close eyes on the monitors, watching for spikes or drops in any of the functions. His blood pressure dropped, but only by two points, before holding steady. His heart beat, still weak, didn't change and she exhaled softly as the Healers stood away.

Mace's body was functioning on its own and hadn't shut down.

With a respectful nod to Padmé, the Healers shifted Mace to a stretcher and moved him into the next room. Padmé followed, observing as they efficiently attached a mask, adjusted the privacy shield around his hips and slid him into the bacta tank.

"Many thanks to you, Doctor Naberrie."

Padmé almost jumped at the sound of the wizened voice and smiled sheepishly as she looked down to find Yoda standing beside her. "Your welcome, Master Yoda. I did what I could."

"And much it is." Yoda nodded once with approval, his face seeming to have gain years since she'd last seen him. "Needed Master Windu is."

Padmé watched as the Bacta levels were checked carefully and the monitors calibrated. “Every Jedi is needed, Master Yoda. If you’ll excuse me, I should check the mixture on the tank to ensure he’ll get the correct dosages.”

“If you must.” Yoda waved her towards the tank.

Padmé shook off the hand Cordé placed on her shoulder and strode to the tank. She closed her eyes, pressing her fingers to the bridge of her nose and squeezed as she forced herself to focus. Anakin’s mixture, the night she’d collapsed, what had she been adjusting it to? Carefully, deliberately, she thought back to that night, knowing her mind was sluggish, but also knowing amputation in this case was not an option. If Mace’s wounds turned septic, he would die. She had to remember if she was going to save his life.

Anakin’s face, surrounded by the bacta glow, came back to her mind slowly, the pad appearing in front of her gaze. Only the numbers wouldn’t come into focus. She fought, trying to focus, to get a clear image, but could only watch as her hand passed sluggishly over the numbers, not certain which ones had been pressed.

Think! she raged at herself, her thoughts lashing violently through her mind. His life depends on it. If you don’t succeed now, all of your work will be for naught. You’ll have thrown away your career for a man who’s impossible to save. Think!

But she couldn’t. Not without help, not without focus. She sagged against the tank, breathing raggedly. “Master Yoda.”

“Hmm?”

She lifted her gaze to his. “I understand that Jedi sometimes need to use the Force to focus their thoughts. Is there some way for one of them to help me focus mine?”

“Why need it, do you?”

Her gaze shifted back to Mace’s seemingly lifeless body hanging suspended in the bacta. “Before my collapse during Anakin’s care, I had devised a combination of bacta levels to help speed along recovery to minimize the possibility of a wound turning septic. Only, I never got the chance to write them down. They’re locked in my brain. If Master Windu is to recover, I need that formula. If his wounds turn septic we’ll lose him.”

Yoda examined her carefully. “A Jedi have in mind, do you?”

“I was hoping you could help me, Master.” She smiled faintly. “The longer we wait to implement it, the better the chance of a wound turning bad.”

Yoda stepped to her side, motioning for her to kneel. “Painful this may be, Doctor. Ready are you?”

She nodded, kneeling beside him, and managed not to flinch as his hands settled on her face. She took a deep breath, waiting.

Yoda’s fingers settled on her temples, and his eyes closed. “Remember, Doctor Naberrie. Information need, do you.” He murmured softly, as if chanting.

Padmé closed her eyes, focusing on the memory she was trying to dredge up, uncertain exactly how it would work. Slowly the image began to focus and she swore she *felt* Yoda

slowly using the Force to manipulate that memory. To bring it forward, into her conscious mind.

Suddenly, clearly, she remembered what she'd been doing. Her gaze flew open and she stood, punching in the sequence of dosages she needed. The mixture turned a slightly yellowish-green color as it changed before returning to its normal rosy consistency.

Yoda stepped back.

She nodded, satisfied for the moment, and turned to one of the healers nearby. "You, Healer."

"Anja Deska, Doctor Nabberrie. Jedi Healer".

"Jedi Healer Deska, are you on rotation in here tonight?"

She nodded. "Yes, Doctor. Do you have further instructions?"

"Just one." She glanced back at Yoda. "If there's any change for the worse wake me immediately. You'll know by a gray tint entering the bacta. And for the love of the Force, don't touch the controls. The mixture is specialized for his kind of injuries."

"Of course, Doctor. Will you be staying at the Temple until he's removed from the bacta?"

Padmé hesitated, her head beginning to ache, and she hadn't yet removed her scrubs. She should still, theoretically, be under house arrest and so subject to those conditions. But she couldn't leave with Mace still in the danger zone.

"Staying she will be." Yoda's voice was firm, taking the decision away from her. "Prepared one of the recovery rooms Jedi Skywalker has, so nearby she will be."

"Thank you, Master Yoda. For everything. If you'll excuse me?"

They nodded, and Padmé stumbled her way back to the surgery and their sanitation stations. She scrubbed down, carefully cleaning off the bodily fluids and tossing the covers in the disposal. She wasn't thinking as she finished, nearly asleep at the sink.

Warm, familiar, comfortable arms encircled her, picking her up in a strong embrace. She cuddled close, burrowing her face into the muscular chest. She felt herself moving and didn't care. The arms that held her could only belong to one person, and, if she was dreaming again, she didn't want to wake up. She was going to enjoy it.

It was her last thought as she drifted off to sleep.

Padmé woke the next morning with her mind clear and a purpose as she threw back the covers. She was still in yesterdays clothing, but didn't care as she slipped into her shoes. She paused, frowning at the bed.

How had she ended up there?

She didn't remember anything after she'd began scrubbing down, and hadn't been shown to this room.

“Oh good, you’re awake.”

“Jedi Healer Deska.” Padmé turned towards the door. “How’s our patient this morning?”

“Doing fine, Doctor Naberrie, thanks to your timely arrival. I fear had you not arrived we wouldn’t have been able to maintain him much longer.”

Padmé stepped out of the room and into step with the healer. “What happened to him?”

“It was Grievous, Doctor. That mechanical monster ambushed Master Windu. They’d been attempting to lure Grievous into a trap and were instead caught unawares.”

“Where were they?”

“In the under city.” Anja led the way into the treatment room and then escorted her into the room with the bacta tank holding the Jedi Master. “We lost Master Plo and two more apprentices before Obi-Wan and Anakin were able to get to them.”

Padmé could hear the calm acceptance in the woman’s tone, but a part of her wondered if losing a Jedi wasn’t like losing a part of ones self. Were they all diminished when another Jedi passed? She shook the thought away and checked the read out on Mace’s tank. Mace’s color was good, the wounds now pink instead of an angry red, and she was glad they hadn’t bandaged them. Direct bacta application was best for this kind of wound.

“Everything looks good.”

“That’s a relief.” Anja smiled. “Will you be staying long?”

“I’d best stay for several days until we know for certain that Master Windu’s wounds are healing properly. If there’s a complication, I may need to do another corrective surgery.”

“I understand. I’m certain Master Yoda wouldn’t mind assigning you that room for a few days.”

“You don’t have many casualties?”

Anja shook her head. “Jedi lead dangerous lives, Doctor Naberrie. Either they’re killed out right, or they get lucky and have someone of your skill to step in. If you’ll excuse me, I have duties to complete this morning.”

Padmé waved the woman away, turning back to double check on Mace’s readings. Normal; the same as moments ago. She sighed, letting out a breath and nodded, making a mental note that she had appeared to have found a stable mixture for critical injuries. While bacta as a whole was capable of healing such a wound over time, it took weeks in bacta for such wounds to heal without additional help.

“How is he this morning?”

Padmé turned, a smile lighting her face. “The mixture appears stable.”

Anakin nodded to the tank. “The same one you were going to use on me?”

She nodded, moving to stand in front of him. He took a half step back, into a nearby corner, partially shielding them from anyone that might come into the room, behind the bacta tanks. “I was right. It would have worked.”

Anakin lifted his hands and gently brought them down on either one of her shoulders, letting out a shuddering breath as his hands touched her, applying the tiniest of pressures to bring her forward the whole way and into his embrace. She went willingly, closing her eyes as she placed her head against his chest and inhaled. His presence wrapped around her as firmly as his arms, reassuringly solid. "I've missed you, Anakin."

"I've missed you too, Padmé. Did you get my message?"

She nodded. "It was very sweet of you."

He nuzzled her hair. "I had to try." He paused, gently running one hand down her back. "Are you free this morning?"

"Maybe."

"Care you join me for the morning meal?"

She pulled away, looking up to meet his gaze. "I thought I owed you dinner."

"You do." He winked at her, letting her go. "Two of them."

She swatted at him playfully. "You!"

"I know, I'm horrible." He nodded to the tank, turning serious. "Is this going to get you in trouble with the Tribunal?"

She turned and looked back at Mace's inert figure floating peacefully in the bacta tank. "Probably. I'm not supposed to practice until after I clear my name."

"How's it looking?"

"I got the malpractice charges dropped yesterday." She turned to face him. "Helkor implanted a recording device on the back of your neck and tried to use the gathered recordings as evidence."

"So that's what it was!" Anakin's eyes darkened. "I see I have another reason to pay Helkor a visit."

"Not until after I get his license to practice revoked, Anakin." She shook her finger at him. "The son-of-a-hutt has a lot coming to him, but he's mine first."

"So long as he plays fair." Anakin grasped her hand. "So long as I have you for morning meal, how about I cook? I'm not bad you know, and it's as good a time as any to prove I'm fully healed."

"I don't know Anakin." She glanced back at the ward, obviously torn between staying in case something went wrong and going with him to some place where they weren't being monitored by security cameras — even ones with dead zones. She only hoped he knew where they were and that they were currently standing in one. "I should really be here in case something goes wrong."

"Anja's around." His eyes sparkled. "And she has your comlink channel."

"She said she had duties."

"She's an apprentice Healer. The medical ward is her duty."

“Oh.” Padmé finally nodded, realizing as much as she wanted to ensure Mace’s recovery continued without problems, she wanted to spend time with Anakin. Alone. “You win. I accept your challenge, Jedi Skywalker. Lead on and prove that you have regained your motor control.”

He bowed over her hand with a flourish. “This way milady.” His eyes sparkled, and her heart skipped a beat as he tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow. She went willingly, unable to resist, knowing with a positive feeling that she had the bacta mixture right this time and Mace would recover.

She was free to enjoy Anakin’s company, and enjoy it she would.

“Voila!” Anakin placed the plate in front of Padmé with a flourish and a smile. “Morning repast a la Skywalker.”

She laughed softly. “You’ve certainly regained your sense of humor. Anja tells me you and Obi-Wan saved Mace’s life.”

He shrugged, taking a seat across from her and putting his own plate in front of him. “Obi-Wan and I were supposed to be the bait, but Grievous went after Master Windu instead. He was just lucky we got there before Grievous could finish his killing stroke. A moment later and we’d have been too late. Plus, it helps we had Shaak Ti with us — she’s a qualified field Healer. She was able to get Master Windu into a Force induced trance which allowed us the time we needed to get him back here and to you. You do nice work, by the way.”

“Thank you.” She lifted her glass, accepting the compliment and took a sip before trying her meal. “This is delicious, Anakin.”

He grinned. “I told you so.”

She chuckled softly. “So you did. Can I ask you something?”

He nodded.

“When did you get that thing in your neck removed?”

Anakin’s eyes darkened. “Grievous missed me by a hair.” He turned his head, showing her the neatly healed scar that was a thin band of white along the base of his neck. “When we first encountered him several weeks ago, shortly after you left, he tried to take my head off his with claws. I ducked, but he caught that thing and ripped it out. I don’t know what happened to it.”

“Helkor somehow got his hands on it. That was the recording device he’d implanted on you.” Padmé took a sip of the tea Anakin had thoughtfully provided with their meal. “I don’t know what it recorded or how long it lasted, but it was his key piece of evidence in the malpractice case.”

“He’ll pay for that. I don’t appreciate having my person violated by rogue medical personnel.” His blue eyes suddenly sparkled. “Unless its you. How about it Padmé, would you like to violate my person?”

"Anakin!" She laughed, easing the tension Helkor's actions had brought to the table with them. "Can't you ever be serious?"

He shrugged, watching her intently. "Helkor will get what's coming to him. Until then, he can be my amusement at the very least. He owes me that much."

She chuckled. "Fair enough." She turned back to her meal, marveling that he was so handy in a kitchenette. He put her own cooking to shame. She was almost done when she glanced up, noting that Anakin hadn't been keeping pace. He'd barely touched his meal while hers was almost gone. "Is something wrong?"

"You're more beautiful than I remember."

Padmé blushed, putting down her utensils. "Anakin."

He reached across to take her hand. "It's true. I've missed you, Padmé. You've been on my mind every minutes of every day since you left. I keep asking myself what I did to deserve you." His expression became sad. "But you're not really mine, are you?"

"Of course I am! I've thought of you just as often, even when I should have had my mind on the trial."

"Then you've not had second thoughts or doubts?"

"Have you?"

"Never. Not once." He squeezed her hand, searching her gaze. "Would you marry me, Padmé?"

Her jaw dropped in shock, unable to contain the thrill of elation that swept through her with those five little words. Marry him? Be Mrs. Anakin Skywalker? To share his hopes, his dreams and his life? To bear his children, to be his wife in every sense of the word? It was a question she didn't need to think about; yes, yes, Yes! Force yes, in a heartbeat, right now if they could.

The feeling didn't last as reality reared its ugly head and her throat closed, fighting against the urge to shout *Yes!* to his proposal. She instead voiced the obvious objection. "You're a Jedi."

"And you were my Doctor. That doesn't mean I love you any more or less. I love *you*, Padmé Naberrie, and I want you to be my wife. To know that you're mine and only mine."

Her throat closed. She wanted to say yes. She *needed* to say yes. But she couldn't. Not when her future was uncertain, with her trials not yet fully completed, her own career on the line and possible incarceration staring her in the face. Not when their marriage would have to be a secret and a lie, something they couldn't speak about with anyone lest it cost him his path as a Jedi. Not when their futures were so uncertain she didn't yet know if she had one anymore.

"Padmé?" He searched her gaze, alarm growing in his own.

She took a deep breath and forced herself to speak past the tears burning behind her eyes. "I can't."

“Why not?”

“We can’t, Anakin.” She repeated the words, trying to convince herself as much as him. “I’m looking at possible incarceration if the Tribunal finds me guilty. It could be as little as days or as long as ten to twenty years. I couldn’t do that to you; to us. You’d never see me and it wouldn’t be fair.”

“I don’t care.”

She pulled her hand away, fighting to keep an even tone as she rose to her feet. “I do, Anakin. I don’t want to be a trophy wife. Think about it, even if we married under ideal circumstances, we’d still have to hide. We’d have to live a lie. No one, not a single soul, could know about it. Not Obi-Wan, not Cordé. We’d have to always be on our guard, looking out for dangers. We couldn’t have a family.” She choked, unable to continue, a tear sliding down her cheek. She could still see those blonde haired — blue eyed children she was dreaming about in her mind’s eye. Children they could never have.

“Padmé.” He pushed to his feet and pulled her into his arms, gently stroking her hair, murmuring soft reassurances. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked.”

“It’s not that.” She closed her eyes, her throat tight. “I *want* to marry you, Anakin, more than anything, but I can’t. I’m sorry, but I can’t. Not with so many unknowns.”

“Shh. It’s alright, my love.” He kissed the crown of her head and then gently kissed her closed eyes and the trails of moisture that were sliding down her cheeks. “I understand. I’m sorry, I’ve thought of little else since I sent you my message. I’ve missed you; I shouldn’t burden you with more. You have enough to worry about.”

Her eyes opened slowly, meeting his. “I can only promise you now, Anakin. Not tomorrow, not a year from now, but today and only today. I wish I could do more.”

“All I need is your love, Padmé. That’s all I want.”

“You have it.” She slid her hands into his hair and pulled his head down, angling her lips beneath his as she initiated a kiss. His touch was like fire, branding her as his and his alone. She relished it, reveled in the leashed power in his frame, the tenderness with which he held her. She put every ounce of her feelings for him into that kiss, wishing their reunion could have been happier, not bittersweet. She tried to tell him with taste and touch.

Her hands slid from his hair to tangle in the front of his shirt. His hands slid up her back, one delving into her hair, cradling her head, the other settling low. She was pulled flush against him, her curves molding willingly and unconsciously to his. She moaned softly under his mouth, gasping as he deepened the kiss and then meeting his passion with her own. She was tipped backwards, off balance, his hand possessively splayed across her back as he ravished her mouth.

Her hands shifted, flesh meeting flesh as her fingers slipped unwittingly around the folds of his shirt. His chest was warm under her fingertips, smooth and strong; leashed power. She ached into his unconsciously, one hand splayed across the smooth expanse of muscle as the other continued to pull him forward, unconsciously begging for closer contact. For more intimate contact.

He pulled away, his breathing ragged as he leaned his forehead against hers. They were still for long moments, unwilling to relinquish the intimate contact even as he straightened and she regained her feet. Finally, when he spoke, his question was halting. “Is your answer still no, milady?”

She half laughed, half sobbed. “For now.”

“For now?”

She nodded. “For now. I love you, Anakin, but I can’t marry you. Not yet.”

“That ‘yet’ gives me hope.” He kissed her again, quickly but no less gently. “And you still owe me two dinners.”

She laughed, breaking the tension between them. “You’re fully recovered; surely you don’t need to cook for me again.”

“I want to.” His azure eyes were intense, boring into hers, demanding to be acknowledged. “It will be a *pleasurable* experience.”

She shivered at the implication in that subtle phrase. “When?”

“When does your trial end?”

“Three and a half weeks, unless I can get the rest of the charges thrown out.”

He kissed her again, finally finding the strength to relinquish his tight hold on her and give her some space. “Then I’ll cook for you — to celebrate your win.”

“A little premature, don’t you think?”

He shrugged, gently pushing the strands of her now unruly hair behind her ear. “I have confidence in you. Besides, you didn’t do anything wrong; there’s nothing they can find you guilty for.”

She slipped her arms back around his waist and placed her head back on his chest, wishing she had his confidence. “I hope you’re right, Anakin. I hope you’re right.”

Chapter 21

Chapter 21

It was noon when the Tribunal guards tracked her down.

The clones entered the medical ward in the temple without announcement or warning. Padmé was in the middle of writing out a series of instructions for the Healers with regards to Mace's care over the next several days as the bacta mixture continued to slowly seal his wounds.

"Ms. Naberrie."

Padmé almost jumped, looking up started. She managed to retain her composure and found a smile. "Good afternoon, gentlemen."

"You're to come with us. Your house arrest has not been rescinded."

"There was an emergency. Surely I'm allowed those." She turned back to her instructions.

"You're not permitted to practice, Ms. Naberrie. The Syndicate has requested we place you in a holding cell until such time as you can be brought before a Tribunal for punishment." One of the Troopers stepped forward. "You're to come with us immediately."

"In a minute, I'm not finished here."

"Immediately, Ms. Nab—"

"I said in a minute." She snapped the words, looking up with a dangerous glint in her eyes. "You wouldn't want to be responsible for the death of one of the best known Jedi Masters and Council members would you?"

They shared a look but held their peace and let her finish her notes.

Padmé steadfastly ignored them, checking the numbers on the mixture several times to ensure she had the balance right even as she jotted them down for Anja and the rest of the Healers. Mace's wound hadn't yet lost their pink and red tints, but they were more pink than red and he was breathing on his own. His vital signs hadn't changed and she had taken heart that he was showing small improvements almost hourly. They might be tiny, like a point gained on his blood pressure, but they were improvements none-the-less.

She double checked the notes, adding a couple of additional instructions for after care since she didn't know if she'd be available to assist. She also included her home comlink number as well as her personal one, just in case Anja lost the one Anakin had given her.

The Troopers shifted nervously and she shot them a quelling look as she finished her report. Carefully, she copied it three times. Once for Anja, once for the medical files in the temple and a copy for herself. The original would be filed at her clinic by Cordé to ensure an accurate account of the surgery would be available. Included were the security recordings of the surgery itself and the ensuing immersion in bacta.

Padmé finally stood. “I’m ready.”

The Troopers fell into step, flanking her, and escorted her out of the Temple. No one stopped them, no one approached them. For that she was grateful. She half expected Anakin to arrive, lightsaber blazing, demanding that she be released. But he wouldn’t because she’d asked. She requested, after their morning meal, that he leave her time to think and organize. To plan.

And so she had. She’d made plans for the contingencies, including adding the name of a colleague in her field they could send for in the event Mace took a turn for the worst. She put her affairs in order, fully expecting to serve the maximum term for disobeying the Syndicate’s orders.

Padmé expected to be stripped of her license permanently, dismissed and forbidden to practice any kind of medication.

If that happened she wasn’t entirely certain what she would do. If they didn’t include time to serve as part of her punishment, she might be inclined to accept Anakin’s proposal. After all, once out of the spotlight, hiding their relationship, and having a semi-normal one, would be much easier.

Still, she would miss this. Helping people was so much a part of her nature that it was almost a physical pain to think about not being permitted to continue down her chosen path.

The Troopers led her into the Syndicate’s Tribunal halls and then, moving beyond the Tribunal rooms, down into the recesses of the Syndicate’s justice system. They passed the clean, sterile hallways of the incarceration chambers and stopped outside the minimal security holding cell area. The Troopers passed a piece of information over to the guard, who read it over, and then waved them through.

Padmé shivered as they passed a couple of vents, the tiny cells almost foreboding in size. She was ushered into a nine foot by nine foot cell with a bunk on one end that folded against the wall and a chair in the corner by the door. “Surely you don’t expect me to live here?”

One of the Troopers shook their head. “No, Ms. Nabberrie, we don’t. This is a temporary arrangement until your preliminary hearing this afternoon.”

“Oh.” She swallowed hard as the door was closed, locking her inside the tiny area. “Will someone be sent over to check on Master Windu?”

The Troopers didn’t appear to hear her question and quickly walked back the way they’d come.

“Trooper!” She snapped at them, attempting to call their obedience into play. “I asked you a question, soldier!”

One of them stopped and then turned, fractionally. “Master Windu is no longer your concern.”

It was an answer she would have to be satisfied with.

Time passed slowly and Padmé fought to keep from gluing one eye to her chrono. She'd been left to her own devices, and it was now nearing midnight. She'd spent the better part of the afternoon trying to get the guard's attention and information about Mace's progress. She'd been rebuffed at every turn and the privacy shield closed on her cell. They'd served her the evening meal in silence before retreating. Her queries as to when she would be put before a hearing going unanswered. Thus far it had been a thoroughly unproductive day, barring that morning, and was starting to go stir crazy.

What was going to happen to Mace? Would he be alright? Had her mixture held and was he healing properly? Were there complications she hadn't anticipated meaning she may have given up her career for a man she couldn't save?

She pushed the thought away. She'd had to try, to at least attempt to save Mace's life. She'd never have been able to live with herself if she hadn't. She lay on the bed provided, her hands behind her head, staring at the sterile ceiling, the mild, off-white color more aggravating than soothing. She made a mental note to never paint her waiting rooms that shade.

She'd missed the 1300 reconvening of the trial the day before and now another day of Helkor's testimony had gone by, unhindered and unheard except by the Tribunal members. What had been said, what had she missed? Had Helkor sneaked in some piece of evidence she hadn't been there to object to? Had he maybe tried to paint himself in a better light, knowing she wasn't there to object to his lies? Had he tried to worm in the vocal evidence on some bogus counter strike they hadn't anticipated? Or had he simply behaved?

She doubted it.

Padmé closed her eyes, telling herself she should sleep, that her sentencing for her latest infraction would — no doubt — be coming up in the morning, but images began popping up. A mixture of the previous evening, of Mace's surgery and his injuries. Of that morning and Anakin's hurt expression when she'd turned down his proposal despite her desire to say yes. His pleasure when she'd informed him she might say yes at another juncture in the future.

An ache formed near her heart. Her actions in saving Mace may have cost her that 'maybe'.

If they threw her out, stripped her of her title and right to practice, banished her from the Medical Syndicate it would be a mercy. But Padmé knew she was thinking wishfully. She'd read far too many cases of Doctors who had practiced without a license to think anything short of hard time would please the Syndicate. It wasn't enough to strip someone of their profession; they had to ensure the lesson was learned.

She closed her eyes. Cases such as hers eared no less than 10 years. 10 years. She'd be nearly thirty five, still young enough to bear children, but would Anakin still want her? Medical personnel held for crimes against the Syndicate and their instructions were allowed no personal visitors, no visitations. Nothing private at any rate. Nothing that would allow their secret feelings to be expressed.

Anakin would be no more able to come see her than if she could fly. If he did, their relationship would surely be exposed and he'd be expelled from the Jedi Order. She couldn't ask that of him, wouldn't ask that of him. She swallowed against the lump in her throat.

If they found her guilty she'd have to somehow get a message to him. He would have to let her go, to move on with his life. The maximum sentence she was looking at was life; he needed to have one of his own. She didn't expect him to wait for her, couldn't, not in all fairness.

Even as she made up her mind for a worst case scenario, her heart squeezed painfully. No matter what she told Anakin, she knew she would never be able to do the same.

Chapter 22

Chapter 22

At 0900 the following morning Padmé was brought to the Tribunal hall for sentencing.

“Padmé Naberrie.” The disapproving tone lashed at her, but she straightened her spine, determined to take her punishment in stride. She stood before the trio of high ranking Syndicate members who wore identical frowns of disappointment. The Spokesperson’s voice was deep, foreboding, and probably chosen to be deliberately so. She tried not to let it faze her as she stared, almost blankly, at a point beyond them.

She wasn’t going to say a damn thing if they didn’t ask her.

“Padmé Naberrie.” The Spokesperson intoned her name one more. “You are in violation of Syndicate laws and you have been found guilty of violating your voluntary house arrest, providing medical knowledge for the purpose of practicing, failing to present your person to a discipline hearing and practicing without a license. Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

Padmé finally brought her gaze back and slowly met the gaze of each member. “I took an oath to serve, your Excellency. I vowed to do no harm and to value life, no matter the species or origin, above personal consideration. I *am* guilty of following my conscience to save a man’s life and if that’s a crime, no one in my profession should be allowed to practice. I gladly accept whatever punishment my compassion has brought down upon me.”

The three judges exchanged looks, conferring through their securely linked datapads. Padmé returned her gaze to the spot on the wall beyond the Syndicate members. She knew they hadn’t expected her to admit to the ‘crime’, but she wasn’t about to lie, as if she was ashamed of her actions. Let them take it for what they will; Mace had needed her help. *Hers*, not theirs, and no one else on planet would have been able to even attempt to put his wounds back together. Yes, she was guilty and she would take whatever punishment they deemed fit; even if it meant revoking her license permanently.

“Guilty by admission does not make your crimes any less serious.” The Spokesperson began to speak several minutes later and Padmé’s heart sank. They’d decided. From the sound it, it was serious. “The Syndicate rules that you are to be stripped of your rank, privilege—”

A knock, a highly unusual event during a sentencing hearing, sounded on the door and interrupted the Spokesperson. The Spokesperson glanced at his colleagues and then nodded to the door. “Enter.”

The doors opened slowly and a small, cloaked figure entered, leaning heavily on a gimmer stick that tapped on the floor in a slow, staccato beat. “Busy are you, Doctor Naberrie?”

She couldn’t answer, her heart in her throat as she realized why Master Yoda was there. His look was reassuring, but the Syndicate members had made up their minds. She was going to lose everything because she’d helped Mace. Everything, because she’d put the value of a

man's life ahead of her career. She didn't, couldn't regret it, but that didn't make the pain of losing all she'd worked so hard for any less.

The three Syndicate members conferred on their datapads for a moment before the Spokesperson spoke up. "Padmé Naberrie is being permanently stripped of her rank and privileges, among other punishments, Master Jedi."

"Your decision you make not knowing why. Unwise, that is."

"This is not your jurisdiction, Master Jedi." The Spokesperson's tone was respectful but sharp. "We govern our own."

"Understand I do. Think you must; fair this is, without seeing why?"

"We don't need to know why, Master Jedi. She broke our laws. We can't simply make exceptions for circumstance."

"Different all circumstances are. Precious life is. Understand this, Doctor Naberrie does. Risk the displeasure of the Syndicate for less, she would not."

"Life or Death?" The Spokesperson sounded skeptical. Every person who broke their rules *claimed* life and death circumstances including Padmé Naberrie. Rarely, if ever, were that the case.

"Doubt my word do you?"

"We're not questioning your word, Master Jedi."

"Then nothing to lose you have. Carefully consider, you must, such actions your propose. To lose a Doctor as skilled as she, a travesty this would be. Come. See. When all the facts you have, decide fairly you will."

The Syndicate members exchanged looks and then nodded slowly. "Padmé Naberrie. We withhold judgment until after our return from the Jedi Temple. You will accompany us so that you can explain your actions."

Padmé's throat was dry as she nodded. A reprieve? Was it possible a look at the holo records in the medical lab would salvage this fiasco? Would a look at Mace's injuries, now two days healed, be enough to convince the members that she'd been right in her decision? That it had really been no decision at all? Dare she hope?

She followed them out of the room, guards taking up positions on either side of her, as Yoda led the Syndicate members out of the room and towards the speeder that would take them to the Jedi Temple. As Padmé settled into the rear seat, she thought she saw Master Yoda look her way and wink. She blinked, looking back to see, and passed it off as her imagination. The Jedi Master was facing forward, sitting as serenely as ever.

Padmé entered the room holding the bacta tank in which Mace was housed at the Jedi Temple and sucked in a sharp breath. The tank fluids were tinted gray.

"Anja!" Padmé stepped forward, shouting for the Healer woman, her gaze fixed solidly on Mace's tank.

The guards stepped in front of her, blocking her path as the Jedi Healer appeared, a concerned look on her face. Padmé's gaze turned deadly, like a mother protecting her children. "Move aside or I'll throw you aside. That man needs attention now."

"He's not your concern, Ms. Naberrie. The Jedi Healer is here." The Spokesperson's words ignited anger, hot and sharp.

"The hell he's not!" Padmé's words were as soft as it had been to the Troopers. "That man underwent major surgery less than 48 hours ago. A surgery the Jedi needed *me* to complete. He had internal wounds you can no longer see and if he doesn't get that tank adjusted immediately we could lose him. That is Jedi Master Mace Windu, member of the Jedi Council, and the Jedi I was brought here to help. Help him I will, with or without your blessing and damn the consequences!" She pushed the nearest Trooper aside and sprinted to the bacta tank in which Mace was floating, expecting, at any moment, for the Troopers to pull her physically from the panel.

It didn't happen.

Padmé concentrated, checking the readout and silently thanking the Force under her breath. The mixture had been changed. Recently, deliberately, and she quickly changed it back to what it had been before, injecting a cleansing agent and an extra antibacterial to fight off whatever the altered bacta may have done. She mentally crossed her fingers that she'd reached it in time as she checked and double checked the mixture.

It was several long minutes before she realized no one had moved from their positions. She looked up, finding Master Yoda's pleased expression as reassuring as the Syndicate's blank expressions were foreboding. She stepped back, her heart racing. "His vital signs are stable and the mixture's been restored but there's no telling how much damage has been done without a thorough scan. Anja?"

"Yes, Doctor Naberrie?"

"Who's been in this room in the last four hours?"

"I'll have to check; Denni was on duty."

"Have one of the others check. I need you to start running a deep scan of Master Windu to ensure there's no further damage."

"I'm the only Jedi currently on duty that has the security holo code clearance for the infirmary, Doctor." Anja was apologetic. "Can you do the scan on Master Windu yourself?"

"Go. Find me the culprit. I'll do the scan myself." Padmé waved her away and Anja bowed to Master Yoda before departing to look at the security holos.

Master Yoda turned to the Syndicate members. "More information do you require?"

The Spokesperson turned and conferred in low voices with his colleagues.

Padmé initiated the scan on Mace, knowing it would require little monitoring for the first several hours. She focused on the numbers and the data coming back to her in the first moments. Basic cellular levels were good, even numbers and a high blood count. All promising. *The preliminary scans are almost always promising.* the thought was caustic and she knew the pessimism came from her current unknown predicament. It was the later scans,

usually after about a half an hour, that started to show the real problems and developments. She only hoped she had the time to monitor those results.

If she didn't, Mace's life could once again be in jeopardy. The earlier she detected complications, the better the chances of righting it without further damage.

"Ms. Naberrie."

She closed her eyes at the summons, taking a deep breath. She couldn't lose, not now, not when Mace's life hung in the balance. She straightened her shoulders and turned, meeting the Spokesperson's gaze with determination. "I beg of you; let me finish my work on Master Windu before you revoke my license. His life hangs in the balance."

The Spokesperson's expression didn't change. "The charge of dereliction of duty is being struck from your record, Doctor. Your obvious care and compassion for your patients, with a complete disregard for your own welfare, speaks more eloquently of your devotion than any other evidence." He smiled faintly. "While we cannot let pass your disobeying of direct orders while under investigation, we will consider alternate punishments. It has been recommended that we add a black mark to your record and fine you."

Padmé felt the air whoosh from her lungs. "You're letting me practice?" She almost croaked the words.

"Yes, Doctor." The Syndicate member's smile didn't waver. "Breathe, or you will become a patient in a time that you can ill afford to be one. The Master Jedi is your patient and in obvious need of your expertise."

"Thank you." Padmé breathed the words softly. "Oh thank you."

"We do it for your patients, Doctor Naberrie, not for you. It is obvious that, without your care, they would be worse off." The Syndicate members turned to Master Yoda. "If you could provide us with a copy of your security holos for our records on this ruling we would be grateful."

"A copy you will have."

"Thank you, Master Jedi. We will speak with the members of the Tribunal in which you are currently facing, Doctor Naberrie. We will impress upon our colleagues the necessity of accommodating this unusual circumstance. We don't promise anything, however this should also count heavily in your favor — despite your complete disregard of orders. Good day Doctor."

Padmé was almost speechless as they walked away, disappearing out of view quickly, Master Yoda with them. She began to shake. Slowly at first and then more violently as the knowledge of what she'd just avoided, of what had just happened, too much for her brain to grasp. Her knees gave out and she collapsed to the floor. She didn't feel the impact as she stared at the place where the Syndicate members had disappeared.

They'd completely exonerated her!

She hugged herself about her middle, closing her lips tightly as she fought to keep a hysterical, relieved laugh from passing through them. She couldn't, wouldn't laugh. If she did she might start to cry so great was the relief. She took a deep breath. Then another, feeling the

shock of having narrowly avoided career suicide. Avoided it by so slim a margin she was almost singed around the edges. She closed her eyes for a moment, taking another deep breath, and then opened them.

She half expected Anakin to show up, but Anja's comment had been enough to give her the hint he was out somewhere doing some kind of Jedi business. She was alone, just her and the holo cams, her arms tight about her waist as she fought for calm, to get past the almost overwhelming surges of relief that were still coursing through her system.

It took her several long minutes before she was calm again. It took more minutes after that before the shaking stopped and she was able to stand. The first thing she did was check Mace's vitals; they'd called her too caring and compassionate. Her own colleagues had called her that on more than one occasion; it was something she would never change. She allowed herself an unrestrained smile as she glued herself to the readout.

Mace would pull through, she would see to that if by no other force than force of will, and then she'd deal with Helkor.

Chapter 23

Chapter 23

Padmé spent the next few days in the medical lab carefully going over the information her deep scans had collected on Mace's physical well being and monitoring the readouts. His vitals were stable, no small accomplishment, and, while she had to repair a minor problem by reopening his shoulder wound, it had corrected itself once immersed in bacta for 24 hours.

The Jedi Master was healing, more quickly now that he was several days past the initial surgery and technically out of the most dangerous hours. It also helped that, once his body had proven to be stable, the Jedi healers had been able to place him into a healing trance. She was seeing results daily, to her relief.

But something didn't add up.

Anja had been searching the security holos for days, since the Tribunal members had witnessed Padmé care for Mace, and she'd been unable to find anyone unusual entering the Medical lab. She'd also been unable to find the password used for the person who'd altered Mace's mixture. When she'd presented her initial findings to Padmé, Anja had been puzzled and determined. Five days later, she was frustrated and it showed.

She should have been able to present *something* to the Doctor, some kind of answer to the question, but the security holos didn't lie. No one had altered Mace's mixtures according to them. Yet, according to controls attached to the tank, someone had. Someone with enough medical knowledge that it had been subtle and gradual. And so she'd searched further back, going back to the beginning of Mace's treatment and carefully scrutinizing each of the holos for abnormal activities.

Padmé frowned at the screen in front of her as she read the data over once more. Mace's system was clean, no infections, no abnormalities, no *nothing*. It was as if the contaminated chemicals had never entered his body. Was that possible? She didn't think so. Not without the Force protecting him, and she seriously doubted the Jedi Master, despite his powers, was currently capable of the easiest Jedi tricks.

There should have been *something* in his system, some trace of the toxins. Especially in the initial screenings. Yet, there was nothing. No sign at all that anything had ever been wrong with the bacta mixture and its additives. No sign that Mace had ever been in any danger.

"You're working too hard."

She jumped at the soft voice by her ear, barely managing to withhold a surprised shout. She closed her eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath, and then turned to face him, a smile on her lips. "I could say the same for you."

Anakin grinned boyishly. He stood close, his knees almost touching her as she'd turned. He was bent over, at an odd angle, but it kept them at eye level; lip level. His gaze dropped to

hers and there was no doubting the train of his thoughts. “I wasn’t able to escape until today and I had to see you, Padmé.”

She glanced towards the door to her small room and noted that it had been closed, the light blinking beside it indicating that the lock had been engaged. She knew there were no cameras; she’d checked. That knowledge lent her freedom as she lifted her hands to cup his face. “I’m glad you came, Anakin.”

He turned his face, never breaking eye contact, and placed a gentle kiss in one of her palms. The restraint in that gesture made her heart ache. He was trying to respect her decision not to marry him; ensuring that nothing happened they might regret. She shivered, and he finally replied, his voice low and strained. “Nothing could have kept me away today. Nothing. I’ve missed you, I still miss you. I feel like a part of me has been torn away and replaced with nothing, Padmé. Like there’s darkness inside me that has no light. No hope. None beyond your promise to rethink your decision to my proposal.” His blue eyes were intense, capturing her as surely as if he held her in his arms.

“Anakin, I—”

He placed a gentle finger over her lips. “No words, Angel.” He straightened, taking her with him until they were standing barely a breath apart. His gaze took in her appearance, drinking in the sight of her as hungrily as that day in the Tribunal hall where he’d come to find her to help Mace. “Just let me look at you.”

She was silent, wondering if her voice would have worked if she’d tried, able to read the heat and hunger in his gaze. Her fingers flexed; they’d dropped from his face to her sides when they’d stood. Her knees trembled, her lips aches with anticipation.

But Anakin did nothing. Nothing beyond look at her. The direction of his gaze could have been a line of fire for the heat it trailed, making her flush, her breath become short. He watched him as he watched her. Could see his nostrils flare ever so slightly, the heat high in his cheekbones, even as hers was. She could almost sense the need, the desire so tightly leashed in his lithe frame.

Her hands curled into fists at her side, trying to hide their shaking, and his hands ever so gently, almost reverently, slid around her own. Her hands were brought between them, breaching the small gap. The backs of his hands were cradled against the sweep of her collar bone; the backs of hers against the defined muscles of his chest. The contact was light, but it was skin on skin and she shivered, knowing, even as she did, that she was fighting a losing battle.

Anakin Skywalker was a weakness and one she couldn’t live without.

She tilted her head to him, a silent invitation and a plea. Her tongue darted out to moisten lips that felt tight and dry. Lips that were begging for the moisture of his.

Something flickered in his gaze and he groaned low in his throat. It was a tortured sound, a desperate sound accompanied by a plea. “Padmé, you’re killing me.”

She felt a thrill chase up her spine at those soft words. She could feel him quaking, his hands shaking ever so slightly where they still rested on her collar bone. She could almost

feel the power of his restraint and marveled at it. She licked her lips again, wondering how he could resist the power that drew them together and the rightness of it. “How?”

One hand shook visibly as he extracted it from around hers and gently cupped her face. “You’re mine, but I can’t have you... and it’s tearing me apart inside.”

Her own hand trembled as she covered his, finally understanding the pain she could see in his gaze. She swallowed hard, fighting the tumultuous emotions that raged through her, searching for a way to ease his turmoil. The whispered words she found were hard, heavy, and far from what she wanted to say. “We can’t.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” His words were fierce, despairing. ‘But I can’t think of anyone or anything but you. Your beauty, your scent, the sound of your voice. I can’t hear the dangers of our missions for the longing to grasp a faint echo of your orders or catch a glimpse of your scrubs. I can’t sleep at night for dreams of your touch. Padmé.’ Her name was ragged, almost torn from his lips. “Please.”

She made her decision in that instant. She loved him. Would always love him, and he needed her. He needed her touch, despite where it might lead. He needed her compassion and her understanding. He needed her love and her strength. She knew what he was asking, at least, she thought she knew.

And she knew, without a doubt, in a rare vision of clarity, that this was the right moment. This was the right time.

“Anakin.”

He visibly shuddered at the sound of his name on her lips, his eyes closing.

She reached up to grasp his face, to force him to look at her. He did so, but only after several deep breaths, the pain in his eyes almost enough to break her.

Almost.

“Regardless of what happens in the future. Regardless of what changes and hardships we’ll have to endure, does your offer still stand?”

He nodded wordlessly, his hands twitching as he took in her meaning.

Padmé inhaled, wondering exactly just how rocky and unstable was the ground on which she was treading? She didn’t care. If a chasm opened up to swallow them whole, she would never regret this. If she spent the rest of her days in a cell with no physical contact, she would never regret this. “Even if it costs you your career as a Jedi? Can you live with that?”

“I can’t live without you, Padmé.” His voice was hoarse. “Nothing else matters.”

It was the answer she wanted to hear and she heard it loud and clear. It wasn’t in his words, but in his touch, his posture; his gaze. In the way he spoke her name, or stroked her cheek. He loved her, for better or worse, regardless of the consequences. Without regret and without a second thought, she slid shaking hands upwards, pushing his Jedi cloak off his shoulders.

Her voice was soft but firm as she spoke, her eyes shining as they met his. “Anakin, my Anakin. I know my future is uncertain, but walking it without you isn’t something I want to do. I love you. Despite the unknowns still ahead of us, I want to marry you. Yes, I will marry

you, yes, I will be your wife, and yes, Force willing, I will be the mother of your — of *our* children.”

The tension seemed to drain out of him, like a plug had been pulled. His head dropped to her shoulder, his arms going about her to pull her tightly against him, and she swore she heard him sob softly. Only once, but sob none-the-less. She embraced him back, her hands working underneath the leather of his jerkin of their own accord as he whispered her name, a soft murmur of love and thanks.

When he pulled back, his eyes were bright, and she could see the change in him almost immediately. The dark cloud was gone, banished by her decision and the way in which she’d made it. At least, she thought it was. He smiled. “I feel like I could dance and sing and not care that the galaxy would think me insane. I’m humbled, Padmé; what did I do to deserve you?”

“You love me.” Her return smile was just as full of wonderment as his. “Anakin—”

“I know, I have lousy timing.”

“Actually, I was thinking...” Her smile turned mischievous and just a little reckless, tinted with the fear and wonder of the unknown. “Shall we get started on the last?”

“The last?” It took a moment for him to get her meaning, to get what she was offering and then he blinked as if he’d been punched. It took a minute in which her smile faded before he spoke again. “You mean children?”

She nodded, suddenly uncertain of herself.

He scooped her up under the arms and swung her around with a laugh, dispersing the tension between them. So infectious was his happiness, his excitement that she couldn’t help but laugh too, though she didn’t really see what was funny. He finally put her on the ground once more and dropped a quick, affectionate kiss on the tip of her nose. “Padmé my love, I wouldn’t dare risk having any child of ours born out of wedlock. They’ll be Skywalkers, just as you will be, I swear it.”

The band of tension that had gripped her chest eased and she hugged him, earning a hug in return. “For all the playboy act, Skywalker, you’re sure old fashioned.”

He smoothed her hair, resting his head on top of hers with a contented sigh, but didn’t dispute the observation. “Only with you, milady. Only with you.” He gently kissed her forehead. “Dine with me tonight.”

“Is that a request or an order?”

“Have dinner with me.” His insistence was almost boyish in its eagerness. “I promise you won’t regret it.”

“The Tribunal—”

“Can wait.” His insistence was gentle. “I heard about your exoneration in Master Windu’s case. I want to celebrate.”

“I wasn’t exactly exonerated; I’ll still be facing a fine and minor temporary suspension once Master Windu is out of danger.”

“We’ll use it to elope and have a honeymoon.” Anakin grinned, finding the good in her darkness, and let her go reluctantly, his hands seemingly unwilling to detach from her. He sighed, as if the loss of contact was something he deeply regretted or that had hurt him. “I came to see you initially because Cordé asked me to let you know that she’ll need you for testimony this afternoon at the Helkor Tribunal.” He scooped his cloak off the floor, but didn’t put it back on.

“This afternoon?” Padmé checked her chrono. It was still mid-morning; she had several hours. So much for his ‘The Tribunal can wait’ excuse. “I’ll be there. Anakin—”

He held up his hand, forestalling what she would have said. “We’ll discuss it at dinner, Padmé. Right now just let me enjoy the fact that you’ve changed your mind and said yes.”

She blushed. “Alright.”

He changed the subject, moving beyond them. “How’s Master Windu?”

Padmé shrugged. “Better than I expected him to be. The mixture is as good as I was hoping, though, something is puzzling me.”

“Oh?”

Padmé took a seat back at her computer, Anakin leaning over her shoulders as she recalled Mace’s exams results. “His bacta became infected. Deliberately. Someone with clearance altered his dosages. If Master Yoda hadn’t brought me here from the Tribunal it would have been much worse.”

“So that’s the puzzle?”

“We can’t locate the would-be-murdered.”

“The Security holos—”

“Show nothing.” Padmé’s tone turned grim. “Anja is looking through them right now, from the point where Mace came in wounded until the Tribunal members left. She found nothing the first and second run through. She’s on her third.”

“That’s impossible.”

“That’s what I said.” Padmé sighed, rubbing her forehead. She felt drained, giddy and lightheaded. And she now had to testify this afternoon.

Anakin’s arms were firm as they slid around her, lifting her from her chair. “You’ve been working too hard.”

She nuzzled his chest, snuggling into his embrace and letting her eyes close. “It needs to be done.”

“Well, it can wait.” He carried her to the corner where her bed was set up. She’d turned the small room she’d been given into sleeping quarters, laboratory and office. He gently placed her on the bed and shook his head when she made to protest. “Sleep, Angel. You need it.”

She made to argue, to protest; she even considered crawling off the bed, but it was so nice of him to take care of her, she couldn’t just throw it back in his face. Besides, a nap would be

very, very welcome. “Alright.” She smothered a yawn, the drained feeling turning into lethargy and weighing her limbs down.

Anakin removed her shoes, set her alarm for the noon hour, and then placed a gentle kiss on her forehead. “Sweet dreams, my love. Don’t forget about tonight with all your other responsibilities. I’ll pick you up this evening; 2100. Dress nice.”

And then he was gone.

Chapter 24

Chapter 24

“How long have you known my client, Ms. Naberrie?”

“*Doctor.*” Padmé stressed the title almost sweetly. “The syndicate has permitted me to practice to assist with saving the life of a Jedi Council member.”

Helkor’s dour scowl was accompanied by a frown from Lebo. “Your Excellencies, we would like any additional portions of Ms. Naberrie’s exploits once on planet barred from record.”

Cordé stood. “We object, your Excellencies. The evidence is not only valid, but carries great weight under the circumstances. The ruling of the other Tribunal members needs to be admissible to establish a pattern of behavior.”

“And what pattern would that be?” The Spokesperson’s tone indicated that he was humoring Cordé.

Cordé straightened her spine. “One of decency, respect and a complete disregard of her own safety or requirements when dealing with a seriously injured patient.”

The Tribunal members conferred, the sound of their fingers rapidly hitting the datapad screen like the clicking of an angry insect.

Lebo broke in before they were finished. “Your Excellencies, all that ruling does is exploit the idea that we must deal with situations as they arise on an individual basis and not within the parameters of the judicial system as its already laid out. The circumstances of the crime should be held to those that are being persecuted.”

The Spokesperson didn’t even glance up, but nodded once, indicating they’d heard his argument as they continued to confer.

Cordé waited patiently, her hands folded in front of her, ignoring the looks that Lebo and Helkor were shooting their way. Padmé was impressed by her friend’s composure and could only hope that she was faring as well.

The Tribunal members finally folded their hands on the table top and the Spokesperson spoke. “It is a prior ruling of the Syndicate body that other Tribunals are to be permitted as evidence, including previous hearings, trials and sentencing. The Sentencing hearing of which you speak will be permitted as evidence under that ruling despite the valid points raised by the defense. Mr. Lebo, your motion to suppress is denied and you will address Ms. Naberrie as Doctor from this point forward.”

“Yes, your Excellencies.” Lebo inclined his upper body stiffly, shuffling several things on the desk in front of him to collect his thoughts before continuing. “How long have you known my client, *Doctor* Naberrie?”

Padmé wanted to smack him for turning her title into a slur, but answered evenly, trying to keep her tone neutral. She wasn't going to let them get to her. "Professionally, I had not worked with him before his assignment to the Medical Frigate."

"Were you aware of his medical history, his areas of expertise?"

"Yes, sir. I am familiar with his career."

"Did you request him specifically?"

"I requested assistance from qualified medical personnel, but no I did not request him personally. The choice to assist was Mr. Helkor's."

"I see." Lebo flipped through his notes. "Are you aware that my client has several commendations for triage and patient care in difficult situations?"

"Yes sir." Padmé bit her tongue. She wasn't going to give them any more ammunition.

"You don't sound thrilled by that, *Doctor* Naberrie. Can you please explain why?"

Padmé took a steadying breath. "Mr. Helkor and I do not share the same priorities. He did not believe in allocating resources to assist any of the civilians caught in the cross fire. He insisted on treating clones before individuals, insisting that the fighting force of the army, not its leaders, be tended to first."

"Why don't you agree with that?" Lebo checked his notes.

Padmé's tone became hard. "Forgive me, Mr. Lebo, but the clones are bred in a test tube, by the thousands, maybe even by the millions. We have the possibility of always growing more. The other individuals, Jedi for example, happen only once every million. They cannot be bred in a test tube or manufactured. They take several decades of training to achieve Knighthood and, for a select few, Mastership. To put the welfare of an individual who is replaceable over the welfare of an irreplaceable individual, would be fool hardy. I chose to put the welfare of those who could not have another copy grown to replace them over the welfare of those that could."

"Doesn't that go against every ethical and moral fiber of your oath?"

Padmé shook her head. "I took my oath to do no harm, Mr. Lebo. A clone who can have an identical replacement grown to replace them is no loss. It's a tragedy, yes, because that clone is still a living breathing human being, but he's not an individual. They are copies of a single man. It would have been far more harmful to let a thousand civilians die, all with individual genetic codes, personalities and dreams, than in letting a thousand copies die. The choice is not one I expect you to understand; you were not there."

"But my client was, and he believed that the clones were the first priority as the main fighting force of the Republic."

"The clones have their own medics. Medics I requested, and employed in the triage centers once I discovered their capabilities. After those first two hectic weeks, despite Mr. Helkor's interference, the triage center lost few patients." She smiled faintly. "Even the clone medics put individuals over the welfare of their 'brothers'. Should that not indicate that they too know the value of individuality?"

Lebo glanced at Helkor, as if accusing him silently of something, but Padmé couldn't dream of what it would be. The representative finally looked back to her, his green skin showing a sheen of moisture that hadn't been there previously. Was he nervous? She hoped so; she certainly was.

"Thank you, *Doctor Naberrie*. I only have one last question before you step down."

Padmé smiled, waiting.

Lebo's expression turned almost sly. "What is the nature of your relationship with Jedi Anakin Skywalker?"

Padmé stared at him, a ripple of shock skirting down her spine like ice.

"Objection." Cordé's voice was very distant as Padmé started with barely concealed horror at Lebo's knowing gaze. He knew. That little slime ball *knew* about her and Anakin. She swallowed hard, struggling to keep her feelings off her face and could only hope she succeeded as Cordé's objection registered. It wasn't the first time she was thankful for her friend's support.

Lebo glanced at Cordé. "Objection? On what grounds?"

"The nature of Doctor Naberrie's relationship with Jedi Skywalker was part of the malpractice charges; those have since been dismissed."

The Spokesperson nodded. "Ms. Cordé is correct. You will refrain from bringing up any evidence or information, Mr. Lebo, with regards to the malpractice charges; they have been dismissed. If you fail to adhere to these conditions, we will dismiss the rest of the charges. Do you understand me."

"Yes, your Excellency. My question is withdrawn. No further questions."

Padmé let out a silent, relieved breath, but the tension stayed. Lebo knew. He *knew*! And that was dangerous. Would they try to blackmail her?

"Your witness, Ms. Cordé."

Cordé stood, checking her notes and then smiled. "Doctor Naberrie, was it easy making the decision as to who would be placed in the bacta tanks and who would not?"

"No, it wasn't."

"Why?"

Padmé thought back to the events, could almost see them in her mind's eye and suppressed a shudder. "We had a limited number of tanks. Those the most seriously wounded needed to use them first. We were able, despite the odds, to get them all into tanks. It left us with several extras which we then used on the Jedi, then the civilians and finally any clones that needed it."

"Did the Jedi use the tanks for long?"

"Thankfully, no. The majority of the Jedi were placed into healing trances by their Healers to accelerate the healing process. The Jedi were needed to go back into the field almost

immediately once their wounds were closed. Some even refused treatment, insisting on carrying on despite their injuries.”

“Weren’t Jedi healing trances enough to heal their wounds? Could you not have let more clones use the tanks and the Jedi heal themselves?”

Padmé smiled faintly. “For certain injuries, we did just that. It depended on the severity of the wound, the time it would take to heal and other various factors. Other injuries had to be immersed in bacta or there was too great a chance of them turning septic and requiring amputation.”

“Did you have the medications you needed to prevent infections?”

“We had some, yes. Most antibacterial agents are included in the bacta itself which is why immersion is so important. Of course, the levels can be altered by someone who’s skilled in the medical field to best heal certain kinds of wounds.”

“Like Jedi Skywalker’s?”

Padmé nodded. “Jedi Skywalker was the worst injured of the Jedi, though there were several others with serious injuries.”

“Was there enough of the medication provided to use on patients who didn’t require bacta immersion?”

“Unfortunately no.” Padmé’s throat closed as she thought about the patients she’d lost in those first, hectic days. She’d thought about better options, about not having been a part of a ground unit; if she’d only spent more time setting up the ward — but that was in the past; a past she couldn’t change. “We had to make some tough choices about who would receive those medications in the first few days before bacta immersion became available to the majority.”

Cordé consulted her notes once more. “You’ve explained to this tribunal that the communications from the fleet were being carefully monitored and controlled. Was there no way for you to submit your report through that net on Mr. Helkor’s reason for dismissal?”

“None.”

“You’re certain?”

She nodded. “I specifically spoke with Master Yoda. The fleet was under communications black out to prevent the Separatist forces from knowing where we were. The blackout lasted two weeks. By that point, the incident with Mr. Helkor and his subsequent dismissal was the least of my worries.”

“How so?”

Padmé smiled faintly. “After Mr. Helkor was dismissed and removed from the Medical frigate, Jedi Skywalker’s care became... problematic. He failed to regain consciousness immediately.”

“As we are all aware of the circumstances under which he was pulled from the bacta, did you have any suspicions at that time —”

“Objection!” Lebo’s voice fairly snapped with ire. “Speculation and potentially prejudicial. Speculations are for Jedi to substantiate.”

Cordé smiled coldly. “The speculation is based on facts, your Excellencies. Facts that presented themselves after the fact and were there for any rational person to link together.”

“Then rephrase your question, Ms. Cordé.”

Cordé inclined her head and began once more. “Were you able to draw any conclusion from the facts you gathered once Mr. Helkor was removed from the ship?”

Padmé looked right at the Twi’lek. “I found that Doctor Helkor had deliberately issued orders for the Jedi patients. Because of his orders, we lost several to septic or inadequate monitoring. Jedi Skywalker was fortunate he only lost his arm and not his life.”

“What conclusions did you draw from Mr. Helkor’s orders and the subsequent consequences?”

“Objec—”

“*Sit down*, Mr. Lebo.” The Spokesperson interrupted him, the words cracking like a whip through the room.

Lebo sat.

“You may answer the question, Doctor Naberrie.”

Padmé inclined her head. “Thank you your Excellency. My conclusions were that Mr. Helkor had deliberately targeted those with the worst injuries who would spend the most time in the bacta tanks. He also focused on the Jedi. The clones took only one loss due to his tampering, where as the Jedi suffered many. The records on the tanks indicated that the levels were changed to prevent antibiotics from being injected at certain intervals. The security holos show that at the time the changes were made, Mr. Helkor was the only person accessing the panels.”

“Do you believe it to have been deliberate?”

“Yes.” Padmé’s tone was grim. “I said before I’d seen Mr. Helkor’s record. I have. What I don’t understand is why.”

“Thank you, Doctor. No further questions.”

The Spokesperson finally spoke after a long minute conferring with his colleagues. “We see no need to continue this farce and waste our time. The evidence presented by Mr. Lebo on Mr. Helkor’s behalf is trivial and insubstantial at best. The evidence we have seen by Doctor Naberrie has been backed up by fact and solid proof. Doctor Naberrie, the charges against you are dismissed. You will be permitted to return to your practice and duties and your record will be expunged.” He smiled faintly. “Except of course for the punishments in conjunction with your sanctions already in place.”

Padmé wondered if she looked as shocked as she felt as relief overwhelmed her senses. She began to tremble, feeling that same, blissful numbness that had accompanied the last ruling from the Tribunal.

“This is madness!” Helkor leapt to his feet, almost screaming his rage and indignation. “I’ve been wronged, I tell you! My reputation is in shreds, she’s getting away with it — and you’re letting her!”

The Spokesperson slapped his palms down on the table in front of him. “We’re not finished, Mr. Helkor!”

“I am!”

“You most certainly are!” The Spokesperson’s voice thundered through the small room, silencing him with its volume. “You are being permanently stripped of your rank and privileges. We see no need for a second Tribunal; your actions have been underhanded, deceitful and in direct violation of the oath you took as a physician. You betrayed the trust of your patients, your colleagues. Your actions are a stain on the reputation of this honorable Syndicate. For deliberately endangering the lives of those patients under your care, we sentence you to life at the Syndicate penal colony without parole.”

“No!” Helkor’s scream was aghast. “You can’t do this to me, I’ve given you everything, everything! It’s that witch, that underhanded witch, Padmé who has betrayed her patient’s trust! She’s the one having an affair with a Jedi!”

“Guards!” The Spokesperson snapped the word. “Take him away.”

Padmé couldn’t move from her seat as Helkor’s ugly accusation — despite its truthfulness — echoed through her mind. An affair with a Jedi. She watched, almost numb, as Helkor was dragged screaming from the court room, Lebo tagging along behind his client. Would they believe him? Would the Tribunal members believe Helkor in the one moment he’d been telling the truth?

When the doors shut, locking out his accusations, the Spokesperson spoke once more. “Doctor Naberrie, you’re free to go.”

“Just like that?”

He chuckled. “Just like that. Mr. Helkor appears to have fabricated a lie that he has come to believe. He will get the help he requires to see that he is no longer a danger to anyone; including himself.”

Padmé let out a relieved sigh, the band around her chest loosening with the Tribunal’s words. They hadn’t believed Helkor. Not one word of it. She stood, bowing to the members of the Tribunal. “Thank you for your time and your ruling your excellencies. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve a patient I’d like to get back to.”

Cordé met her by the door with her case full of the files for the trial as her leave was taken. They exited the little room where the last three and a half weeks had weighed heavily on Padmé; a chain weighing her down. That weight was suddenly gone, lifted completely. She’d done the impossible. She’d managed not only to clear her name but to convict Helkor in a trial he’d instigated before waiting for his own. All because Mik had been so thoughtful as to send the indisputable evidence of the security holo cams.

The realization that she’d just dodged another career killer was only beginning to sink in as Cordé led her to the waiting speeder. A speeder without guards. She frowned, looking

about for their escort, and Cordé touched her wrist. “Padmé; you’re free. They don’t need to escort you home anymore.”

She sat down on the speeder’s bench as her legs gave out. Free. Just as quickly she was back on her feet and pulling Cordé into a tight hug. “Free! I can’t believe it; we beat them Cordé, we really beat them, and Helkor got what was coming to him!”

Cordé laughed, returning the hug as enthusiastically. “He did indeed! How does it feel to be a free woman again?”

Padmé’s smile was exuberant. “I think a certain Jedi I know owes me a celebration dinner; and I’m going to take him up on it!”

“Then we’d better not keep him waiting.” Cordé slid into the speeder, Padmé not a moment behind her, and gunned the motor. The speeder revved into high gear and then sped off, Padmé’s delighted laughter echoing behind them.

Chapter 25

Chapter 25

Padmé stopped in at the temple to check on Mace's condition before returning home. A healer she didn't recognize was sitting on the ground by the bacta tank, one hand against the glass, their eyes closed. Another healer took a few moments to explain to Padmé that the healers were taking turns ensuring Mace was placed into a deep healing trance — and stayed there — to accelerate the healing process.

Satisfied that the Jedi Master was in good hands, Padmé and Cordé returned to her apartment. Cordé spent the next hour packing her things and assisting Padmé with her hair as Padmé prepared for the dinner date Anakin had promised her.

Her eyes sparkled with anticipation and if her smile held a slight tremor of anxiety it was put down to her knowledge of Anakin's unspoken promise. She didn't know what to expect tonight other than he had sworn she would enjoy it. And she was willing to believe him. Any event, even a simple dinner, would be heaven with him.

"Padmé?"

"Hmm?"

Cordé stuck her head into the master suite. "You've a call coming through. Did you want me to get it?"

"I'll grab it. Are you just about packed?"

"Ready and waiting." Cordé's smile was mysterious. "I can't say I blame you for wanting to get rid of me. I'll see you at the Temple in the morning, alright?"

"Cordé?"

"Yes?"

"Thanks. For everything."

She shrugged. "That's what friends are for." She disappeared.

Padmé grinned. Friends indeed! She turned, flipping the switch for her comm. unit and accepted the call. Anakin wouldn't be calling to cancel on her, would he? The face that resolved itself in the image was the last one she expected to see. "Chancellor!"

His smile was easy, almost delighted. "My dear. I just heard about your win in today's Tribunal session. Let me be the first to extend my congratulations."

"Thank you, Chancellor." She hadn't been expecting to hear from him; not this soon at any rate. "It's a great relief that I will be allowed to go back into my practice."

"So soon?" He looked puzzled. "Was I misinformed?"

"Misinformed, sir?"

The Chancellor regarded her for a moment with an expression she couldn't read and then smiled. "I had heard you were tending to a critically wounded Jedi. Seeing as how Anakin is no longer wounded, I had assumed it was something new."

She let out a silent breath and nodded. "You're correct, Chancellor, I am tending a Jedi who's been wounded. Fortunately he's out of the most dangerous portion of the treatment. That is, until we begin rehabilitation."

"Splendid! I see you are intent on celebrating, would you be inclined to grace me with your presence and join me for dinner this evening, Doctor? To celebrate your win, of course."

She blinked and then fought down the urge to panic. She couldn't very well tell the Chancellor she had a date with a Jedi, nor could she tell him no politely. She cast about for options, staring at his pleasantly smiling face. Nothing came to her. Not one thing. She opened her mouth to respond and then snapped it shut. She couldn't accept; she'd already accepted Anakin's invitation!

"Doctor?"

She swallowed hard. She was going to have to tell him no and hope she didn't offend. "I'm afraid I have already made plans this evening, Chancellor. Plans that I am loathe to break, even with such a tempting offer. May I take a rain check? Tomorrow evening, perhaps?"

The Chancellor's image stared at her silently and she wondered if she'd managed to offend him. Finally he nodded. "Tomorrow evening, then. You can join me for the Symphony and then dinner."

"I'd be delighted, Chancellor. Will 1800 do?"

"It will be my pleasure, Doctor. 1800 is fine. Enjoy your evening."

His image disappeared and Padmé placed her hand over her heart, wondering at the tension his request had caused. She'd become frightened, almost panicked, as she'd fought to find a reason to say no and an alternative. At least he'd understood. She took a deep breath, trying to calm the nerves the call had left behind, wondering if hiding her relationship with Anakin would get easier with time, or if it would always be this way. Half-truths, compromises and surprise.

She took a look at herself in the mirror. The sparkle had faded from her eyes, dulled with the knowledge that she would likely never be able to tell anyone, not even Cordé, about the extent of this evening. Dulled with the comprehension of just what it was that she was getting herself into. She bit her lip, taking another deep breath, and then squared her shoulders.

She'd known before she said yes to Anakin. Determinedly, she reached for her eye shadow and pushed the thoughts from her mind. She was going to enjoy Anakin's company this evening, and nothing, not even an ill-timed call from the Chancellor, was going to ruin it.

Padmé couldn't keep the smile from her face as she answered the door chime.

Anakin Skywalker, magnificent in his Jedi robes with his boots shined to almost mirror reflection, waited for her with an answering smile on his lips. She did a double take.

He was dressed in black pants, a hair shy of being indecently tight, and his jerkin one she hadn't seen before, a shade lighter than the black of his pants. He wore a cream colored shirt underneath the jerkin; the collar folded back and open at the throat, complimenting the ensemble with a flash of contrast. The faint odor of boot polish mingled with his natural scent of spice and machine fluid.

Padmé inhaled deeply without quite realizing what she was doing, noting that his eyes dropped as she did.

She wore a daringly cut black gown, one that Cordé had given her early on in the trial once the whole story of her involvement with Anakin had come out. Cordé had insisted she have something "just in case" and she was glad her friend had thought ahead. As a doctor she had very little in the way of social clothing.

She reached down and rustled the skirt a little, feeling a blush crawling up her neck. "Will it do?"

"Do?" Anakin almost croaked the word. He cleared his throat. "It will more than do. I didn't realize you owned anything like this..."

Was that awe she heard in his tone? She turned once, giving him a full look. Her hair was piled high on her head, cascading down across bare shoulders and back. The gown was black and purple with sequined straps and seams. It glittered as she turned; revealing a fuller skirt than it belied which just about touched the ground. The piece was form fitting, revealed more cleavage than she'd ever dared and was accompanied with matching two inch heels.

The look on Anakin's face warmed her through as she met his gaze again. It took a moment before he found his voice and she was infinitely, femininely pleased by the reaction.

"Do you have a wrap or a coat? It's a bit chilly tonight."

Padmé collected the beaded creation from the hook inside the door and shrugged into it carefully. Anakin offered her his arm and she hesitated before taking it.

"It's alright." His assurance was soft. "I'm here officially unofficial tonight."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Anakin chuckled. "The Masters found out I had offered to take you out for a celebratory dinner. As a Thank You, they made reservations and are covering the tab."

She blinked. "They didn't need to—"

Anakin placed a finger against her lips, his blue eyes having darkened considerably since she'd first opened the door. "No, they didn't, but I'm willing to take advantage of it if it means I have their consent for a single night to ensure you enjoy yourself. I have my orders, Padmé. You wouldn't want me to fail, would you?"

She kissed the tip of his fingers, noting how his eyes flickered and then smiled, almost playfully. "We wouldn't want that, would we? Well then, Jedi Skywalker, you had best live up to your promise."

He escorted her to the turbo lift and in before hitting the deck for the speeders. "I shall do my best, Milady. I promise you shan't be disappointed this evening."

Padmé wondered if Anakin ever failed at anything. Dinner had been wonderful. While he hadn't cooked — and she'd teasingly accused him of cheating — their meal had been fabulous. The *Coruscant Wave*, a posh, upscale and expensive restaurant, was one she'd never even dreamed of frequenting. She knew they were surrounded by senators and other high class citizens, influential people who would do wonders for her practice, but she didn't care.

She had eyes only for Anakin and, when their meal was over and he offered his hand, she gladly accepted it. Anakin led her onto the dance floor, his gaze never leaving hers as he twirled her once, lining her up into a position so that he took a single half steps and she was in his arms.

The music was soft, though Padmé barely noticed as he swung her around the floor. Dimly she wondered she he'd learned to dance, but it didn't really matter. His gaze never left hers as they traveled the length of the floor and then back, dancing first one and then a second song in silence.

As the second song ended, Anakin reluctantly led her off the floor and back to their table. Padmé felt like she was floating, like it was something out of a dream as he held her chair and then retook his own.

It wasn't until her glass had been refilled and Anakin took a sip of his own that she found her voice. "Wherever did you learn to dance?"

Anakin's half-smile appeared. "There's nothing to it, really."

"That doesn't answer my question." She took a sip of her drink. "Where did you learn and when did you find the time?"

Anakin chuckled. "Etiquette is an essential part of any Jedi's life, Padmé."

"Don't tell me they include dancing lessons as a part of your training."

"Well, not exactly." His eyes sparkled and she could tell he was enjoying leading her on.

"Then what?"

"You probably wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me."

He paused and then shrugged. "I've watched and learned."

She blinked. "You're right; I don't believe you. Dancing is not something one learns by only watching. You have experience leading a partner around the floor, Anakin. Who was she?"

He reached down and placed his lightsaber on the table. "Padmé, meet my dancing partner." His eyes sparkled with mischief and dark humor. "The footwork on the dance floor is very similar to that of my training routines. It didn't take much to change it to suit leading a partner."

Padmé burst out laughing and threw her napkin at him. "You're making fun of me!"

“No, honestly!” His answering smile was all honesty and chagrin. “Just don’t tell Obi-Wan. He’d never believe me you if he heard I could dance.”

Padmé took another drink, shaking her head. “You’re full of surprises, Anakin, you know that? I’ve had a wonderful time tonight.”

“Me too.” He nodded towards the dance floor. “I’d ask you to dance with me again, but people might start to talk.”

“Talk?”

He nodded. “There are several press attachés here, along with two journalists and a holo reporter. We caused quite a stir when we walked in.”

“I didn’t notice.” Her murmured response was partly chagrin. She *hadn’t* noticed. She’d been too focused on Anakin and their seats, semi-private, and too focused on enjoying his company to notice anyone that might intrude. To notice the dangers and hazards of being in public, despite the council’s approval.

He reached across the table to take her hand, lacing their fingers together deliberately. “I’m glad you didn’t notice, Padmé. It would have made for an awkward evening. I didn’t want you to be thinking about them when you deserved to enjoy yourself. Tonight is supposed to be special.”

“It was special.” She squeezed his fingers and then, reluctantly, untangled her own, placing them in her lap, suddenly conscious of the eyes that he’d known were watching them. She smiled wanly. “I think you’d better take me home, Anakin.”

Anakin sighed. “I didn’t mean to ruin this for you.”

“You didn’t. I’d just like to be out of prying eyes for a while.”

He pushed to his feet, collecting her jacket and then held it as she slipped into it, allowing his fingers to caress the bare skin of her shoulders innocently — but deliberately. She shivered, taking a moment to set the wrap as Anakin signaled for the waiter. He spoke with the man briefly and then the waiter nodded, presenting a pad, to which Anakin pressed his thumb print, and then disappeared.

Anakin escorted Padmé from the restaurant and back to the speeder. She settled in, closing her eyes as she laid her head against the head rest, and wondered how she could have been so naive.

Chapter 26

Chapter 26

Anakin escorted her home without incident and without signs of pursuit. The story that he was taking her to dinner courtesy of the Jedi Council had been accepted once they had found out why.

Padmé invited Anakin in for a few moments when they arrived back at her place. His hesitation was obvious, but he did follow her in and for that she was grateful. They needed to talk. As magical as the night had been, they needed to make some tough decisions about their future together.

He settled on the couch as she started a pot of caf in the kitchenette. She let him wait for the two minutes it took the caf to heat and then pours it into two mugs, bringing them into the main room. Anakin made to get up as she placed the mug in front of him. “No reason for ceremony, Anakin.”

He settled back, taking his mug in one hand but not sipping the contents. “Did you enjoy yourself tonight, Padmé?”

She nodded, sitting beside him. “Very much. Thank you for a lovely evening.”

“My pleasure.” He brought her free hand to his lips and gently kissed the back of it. “I still owe you one more.”

She left her hand in his, enjoying his touch. “I’ll hold you to that, you know.”

“I hope so. You look beautiful this evening, have I mentioning that yet?”

“A dozen times Anakin.”

“Well, it bears repeating.” He grinned. “I promise the next dinner will be more private than tonight too. No holo reporters, no audience. Just you and me and our meal.”

She arched her eyebrows. “I’m not *that* naive Anakin.”

His smile was unabashed. “Good. Then you won’t be surprised when I say the meal won’t only be food.”

“You’re incorrigible.” She squeezed his fingers. “I really did have a lot of fun tonight.”

“Until I mentioned those damn reporters.” He sighed. “I’m sorry, but I felt you should know why we couldn’t indulge. I was expecting them; just not that many.”

“They follow you a lot?”

“The Hero with no Fear?” The dryness in his tone indicated he didn’t really approve or appreciate the title. “Of course. I’m the Jedi PR stunt of the war; I make them look good.”

She laughed softly. “It could be worse and you could actually enjoy the attention.”

“Only when I deserve it. You’re the real Hero, you know. Without you, I wouldn’t be around, Master Windu would have died, we’d have lost ten times as many Jedi and the order would be in chaos.”

She blushed. “You’re just saying that.”

“Never.” He slid closer, his eyes sparkling with an emotion she couldn’t read. “You really are a Hero Padmé. The younglings tell stories about this brave, beautiful Doctor who rushed in, at great danger to herself, to save the ‘Hero with no Fear’ and ‘the Negotiator’.”

“Negotiator?” She paused. “Obi-Wan?”

Anakin chuckled. “Hard to believe, isn’t it? He’s actually not bad at it; far more patient than I’ll ever be.”

“I think you’re teasing me again.”

“Maybe a little,” his grin was unrepentant, “but only because I wanted to see you smile.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere, Jedi.”

He placed a hand over his heart. “And she wounds me! Is there a Doctor in the house, I think she just broke my heart!”

She laughed, pushing him back on the couch. “You’ll live, you rat.”

He grinned, catching himself with one outstretched hand. “Maybe, but only with lots of tender loving care.”

“Hmm.” She knew her own eyes were glittering with amusement but couldn’t help it; he really was too cute. “That’s a prescription I think I can fill.”

Anakin’s embrace was tender as she slid next to him, his hand warm and electric against the bare flesh of her back. His eyes closed partially, darkening once more as he regarded her. Slowly, with little pressure, he pulled her forward, meeting her halfway.

Their lips met softly, and she sighed, feeling the restraint in his kiss. He was holding himself back, carefully controlled. He leaned into her, but kept the kiss light as he brought his other arm around her, one hand sliding under her knees. With a smooth movement she was in his lap, her arms about his neck, in complete control of the kiss.

It was a heady feeling, knowing that she could deepen it, or maintain it; whatever she wanted because he’d left the decision up to her. So she explored. Using her finger tips she traced the contour of his face, learning it by touch and then following with the barest of kisses, tasting his skin as if he were some rare and delicious fruit obtained just for her. And in a way he was.

He shivered under her touch, but remained still, letting her explore.

The spicy scent, mixed with hydraulic fluid, that was his alone invaded her senses. His skin was slightly rough under her lips, stubble beginning to form after a day of activity. She shivered, wondering if it was her heart she could hear pounding or his, and almost giggled at the thought. It had to be hers. She placed her lips against his temple and could suddenly *feel* his heart pounding, as if racing with hers for the win in some absurd contest.

She pulled back as she felt his hands spasm on her back, and looked at his face. His eyes were closed to slits and he watched her through his lashes. Long lashes, incredibly unfairly long lashes. She swallowed hard, suddenly timid. "Anakin?"

"Yes love?" His voice was as rough as hers, making her heart skip a beat.

"I think I should get off your lap."

His hand flexed on her back and his nod was reluctant. "I think that's a good idea."

She shifted, and slid off, getting to her feet and smoothing her dress. Her stomach was in knots, fluttering; how far did she want this to go? Or was the better question did she really want to stop?

"Padmé?"

She closed her eyes against the soft question in his voice, feeling as if it reverberated in the very fabric of her being. Her dress was suddenly too revealing, too daring, and she had the urge to cover herself, to jump into the thickest thing she owned and button it tight up her neck. Yet she was rooted to the spot, unable to move, to speak, her heart warring with her morals as she considered what could happen if she didn't ask him to leave now.

But the words wouldn't come.

"Padmé?"

The rustle of clothing was almost like a blaster shot so loud did it sound in the stillness of her apartment. She opened her eyes and shivered, leaning into his touch as his hands came to rest gently on her shoulders. They slid slowly, aching so, down her arms, rubbing gently, a soft torture as he pressed himself against her back.

She could feel every inch of him from hip to shoulder as his size enveloped her; she'd never felt safer or more pleasantly terrified in her life.

"Are you alright?" She managed a nod as he nipped her shoulder and then gently licked the area with the tip of his tongue, soothing the skin. "Are you sure?"

She shuddered in his grasp, fighting for words.

His arms shifted, his hands sliding further down, his hands clasping hers and then bring them up as he embraced her, both with his arms and hers. "We don't have to take this any further if you don't want to."

How could she tell him it wasn't a matter of want? She finally found her voice, laughing shakily. "It's not a matter of want, Anakin."

He placed a gently, whisper soft kiss on the tip of her ear. "Then what is it, love?"

"I'm afraid."

"I'll never hurt you."

"I know." Her words were whispered.

Anakin squeezed her once and then stepped back, releasing her completely and giving her space. She could still feel his proximity in the room, as if she was supercharged to his

presence, but the loss of his touch was almost devastating. She felt bereft, adrift, as if it had been her anchor in the emotional storm she was fighting. She turned to him, reaching out one hand. “Anakin?”

She was in his arms again a heart beat later, wrapped in his secure embrace, her head tucked tightly beneath his chin. She closed her eyes, wondering what he’d heard in her voice, or seen in her face that had caused him to react so protectively. But, even as she thought it, it didn’t matter. She was safe, protected in the shelter of his arms.

“I didn’t mean to scare you, Padmé.” His words were soft as he gently stroked her hair and back, his touch soothing even as it was arousing.

She wrapped her arms about his waist. “I’m not afraid of you.”

“Then what is it?”

She took in a shaky breath. “I think I’m afraid of what will happen; of this powerful attraction between us.”

His chuckle was felt more than heard as it rumbled through his chest. “Does it help to know I’m as scared as you are? I’ve never felt this way about anyone, Padmé. No one. I don’t know what to expect anymore than you do.”

She absorbed his words in silence for a few moments, reassured by his sincerity and honesty. “Do you think it will be torture when you’re sent away on missions?”

He kissed the crown of her head. “I imagine it will be. I’ll think of you every hour of every day; I already do. But that pain of separation will only make the reunions sweeter.”

Her laugh was shaky. “Like the one outside the Tribunal hall?”

He pulled away fractionally so he could look into her face. “I hadn’t wanted to surprise you like that, Padmé. I’d have waited for a more private location if I could have, but Master Windu’s injury didn’t give me that luxury. I thought you knew.”

“I suspected.” She managed a smile that was as shaky as her voice. “I’m hoping our other reunions won’t be so public.”

He gently stroked one of her cheeks. “Providing there’s no emergency, except my desire for you, my love, I promise they’ll *all* be private.”

She saw the sincerity in his gaze, the banked passions he was barely controlling to avoid frightening her. The band around her chest eased a little. She knew he wouldn’t hurt her, she trusted him to keep his word and knew he would do everything in his power to shield her. She smiled, a full, sincere smile. “Then we’d better find a Justice before your next assignment.”

His responding smile was beautiful, tugging at her heart. “You mean it?”

She nodded. “I may not be able to be Doctor Skywalker officially, but I do want to be your wife, Anakin. With all the privileges and responsibilities. The sooner the better.”

“Will that make this—” he nodded to the minute amount of space between them, “easier?”

“I hope so. But a part of me hopes this never changes between you and I.”

"I agree completely." He lowered his head slowly, his mouth hovering just out of reach above hers. "I just have one more question, Padmé Naberrie soon to be Skywalker."

"Oh?" She fairly gasped the word.

"How many children do you want?"

She shifted her grip, flinging her arms about his neck and kissing him with almost bruising force, her previous inhibitions quieted by that simple, unassuming question.

It was the next morning when they finally left Padmé's apartment and Anakin made his report on the previous evening's dinner to the Jedi Council, relaying her thanks for such a wonderful evening.

If Padmé's smile was a little more secretive, her movements just a touch hesitant as she checked on Master Windu, those who saw passed it off to the night of dinner and dancing with the best looking Jedi in the galaxy. Those who asked received no answer.

For Padmé Naberrie, soon to be Skywalker, would never kiss and tell.

Epilogue

Epilogue

Padmé's dinner the following evening with Palpatine was a casually-formal affair in which Anakin had somehow managed to be present. While she and the Chancellor discussed her future plans in medicine as well as the outcome of the trial, neither Anakin nor Padmé spoke of their personal plans. Secret was just that. Not even the Chancellor would be allowed to know. It wasn't that they didn't trust him; it was that they couldn't afford to let *anyone* know.

The Chancellor was a delight to have dinner with and over the course of the next few months; it became a habit for both her and Anakin to dine with him. They didn't discuss politics, but the new policies emerging from the Medical Syndicate after her trial and the breaks that had eventually won her freedom.

Between it all, Padmé and Anakin arranged a discreet Justice through the father of a patient of hers. He was sworn to secrecy, and glad of it, for he stated no one would have believed him anyway. He asked for only one thing in return for performing the ceremony in lieu of payment.

Anakin's autograph.

Anakin obliged, and they were married in her apartment with no witnesses. It was a small ceremony, an exchange of vows and the signing of official, sealed documents that were password protected and encrypted to prevent anyone gaining access.

Padmé kept one copy, placing it with her confidential files.

Anakin kept the other, the datarod eventually going with him to every place he was sent over the next five years searched for the droid general who had escaped their grasp on Coruscant.

Padmé was assigned permanently by the tribunal to the Jedi Temple as the Chief Medical Officer. She spent the better part of her next year doing rehabilitation with Master Windu. As an older patient he required a more restrained re-introduction to using his limbs. Stubborn, he over strained himself many times and Padmé sent him back to the bacta tanks almost monthly to recover from whatever injury he'd inflicted by trying too hard. For a Master, he had little patience.

Eventually, through Padmé's stubbornness and Master Windu's determination, they got him back on his feet and he resumed his duties just after the one year anniversary of his injury. Master Windu, thanks to her expert care, was now one of Padmé's staunchest supporters and he assisted in pitching several controversial treatments — successfully — to the Jedi Council and Medical Tribunals. Treatments that advanced and enhanced her care of the Jedi who were critically wounded over the next several years.

It was never discovered how Helkor had obtained the data recorder that had been implanted in Anakin's neck or who had changed the mixture of Mace's bacta. Padmé went to

see Helkor once, discreetly, to see if he would speak to her, but the Twi'lek simply wanted to know how she enjoyed being the Jedi's whore. She brushed off the comment, simply smiled that secret smile and asked how he enjoyed being the prison's equivalent.

Their discussion hadn't ended well and she'd left without any useful information.

Anakin and Padmé's marriage was a carefully maintained secret, disguised as a close friendship. It wasn't difficult for them to make time together, and in certain instances, despite Obi-Wan's vocal objections, they were even paired in the later years on limited missions. It was after one of these missions, with Anakin having just been dispatched with Obi-Wan to chase down a rumored sighting of General Grievous, when Padmé first suspected, and then confirmed, that she was carrying Anakin's child...

But that, my friends, is another tale for another day.

Fin

Author's Note: *gasp*, I went and finished it. Whoops! On the bright side, **there's a sequel!** *Gasp* Yup, another "Padmé in the Medical Profession" full length story about her and Anakin and it's called: **Doctor's Silence**. I'll be starting to post it probably in about of month; it's undergoing revision right now.

Thanks for reading everyone, this was a real blast to write and has been a delight to revisit while editing for review!